Kicking and Screaming



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This past weekend I served on a panel at the annual conference of the *National Association of Planning Councils*. The session topic was “social media” and I was asked to speak about the risks associated with the use of social media tools in nonprofit organizations. It was a terrific opportunity to distribute copies of the Winter edition of our newsletter, *Risk Management Essentials*, which contains a thought-provoking article on this topic by lawyers Jeff Tenenbaum and A.J. Zottola. Based on the informal feedback I received during the workshop, it seemed as though half of the audience were willing participants in the social media world, admitting active use of the most popular tools. A smaller percentage of the session attendees seemed a bit fearful of the social media frontier.

The discussion reminded me of David Ropeik’s new book, *How Risky Is It, Really?* Some readers may recall Ropeik, the former Co-Director of the Harvard Center for Risk Analysis, whose prior book is titled: *RISK: A Practical Guide for Deciding What’s Really Safe and What’s Really Dangerous in the World Around You*. Ropeik was a keynote speaker at a Center conference when the event was held in Washington, DC. Ropeik’s new book begins by reminding us that our brains are hard-wired to “fear first and think second.” The first chapter of the book, titled “This is Your Brain on Fear” delves into the field of neuroscience to explain the biology of risk response.

As I was driving home from the conference I realized that my own response to social media has been to “fear first and think second.” One of my co-presenters gently shamed me into admitting a bit of cynicism about the business uses of Twitter and Facebook. Another fellow panelist offered the following provocative statement: “The conversation is going on. The question is: do you want to be a part of it?” Upon arriving home, I logged into my dormant Twitter account and sent my first Tweet. Thus far my experience is reminiscent of talking to myself in the car. Hello? Is anyone out there? The only people who seem to be “following me” appear to have no interest in my Tweet or risk or nonprofits. But you’ve got to give the coffee time to brew, right?

Some of the questions I’ve been mulling over recently include:

- What policies or steps are helpful to curb cyber-slacking among employees?
- How are nonprofits measuring the “return on investment” from their use of social media?
- What are the expected and surprising exposures that arise from the use of social media tools?
- How do active social media users rate their confidence about avoiding exposure to legal liability?

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