Protecting Your Reputation in Cyberspace: No Covert Ads or Shills

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This series of articles looks at how we can use e-mail and other electronic communications responsibly and professionally. It is intended to provide useful information for corporate INFOSEC awareness programs

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In addition to the general rules on civil collaboration in USENET groups and mailing lists, vendor staff should understand that only honesty is acceptable in selling products. It is unacceptable to post forum messages that are covert advertisements. Responses should be focused on the issue at hand and should be as helpful as possible. Forums, newsgroups may have strict standards and there may be negative responses to introduction of your company name and product without clear benefits to recipients. Repeated marketing hyperbole in technical forum repels potential customers. Indeed, even subtle propaganda will be punished: beware of posting superficially-objective responses that are slanted: misleading information will inevitably be punished by public exposure, humiliation of the guilty, and embarrassment of the employers.

Much worse than propaganda from an identified employee of a company is propaganda in the guise of disinterested comment. Company policy should make it clear that employees who are posting information that is relevant to company interests should clearly identify themselves as employees. Commenting on competitive products or services or praising one’s own without clearly identifying oneself. Such shills are highly objectionable, and group members will often express their disapproval in the strongest terms. Shills may be locked out of controlled-access groups, both individuals and employers may receive torrents of abuse, and the effects may last for a long time.

Conversely, it is appropriate to post a disclaimer when appropriate to indicate genuine disinterest; e.g., “Neither the authors nor their employers have any financial interest in the companies, products and services mentioned in this communication.”

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