

Social Media Guidelines

This example is not intended as legal advice. Your organizational goals, purpose, values, and bylaws should drive the creation of this document.

The emergence and impact of social media has transformed nonprofit communications. Social media expands your communications toolbox creating online conversations, increasing transparency, mitigating a reputation attack, and elevating an organization's brand. The key to success with social media is to understand what people care about and develop simple and compelling content that engages and relates to their interests. Always create your social media with the idea of repurposing it on all your communication channels.

As a communications tool, social media can be effective and far-reaching. Just like all your other forms of communication, an overall social media plan, with specific objectives and goals, will ensure that you are developing the appropriate content, reaching the right audience, and measuring the results of your efforts. Without goals you have no way to measure success.

Social media serves multiple uses for an organization, including sharing news updates, providing general information about the organization, and correcting misconceptions. Social media can also be used to reach out and communicate with stakeholders and other influencers, such as the media, elected officials, and community and business leaders.

Most organizations want a social media presence. But before you jump into the world of social media, make sure you are pursuing the right platforms. Anyone who has spent any time on social media knows it can become a tremendous time drain. That's why it is so important to have a plan.

Social media should:

- Support the communication goals of your organization
- Engage in a dialogue with your targeted audiences
- Provide a two-way communication tool and not just a mechanism to 'push' information
- Allow an organization to engage and respond to comments in a timely manner

Social media channels

Social media is about conversations, community, connecting with the audience and building relationships. It is not just a broadcast channel or a marketing tool. Authenticity, honesty, and open dialogue are key. And it should go without saying that material will be truthful and factual.

Social media not only allows you to hear what people say about you, it enables you to respond. Listen first, speak second. Always try to be compelling, useful, relevant, and engaging. Make sure

that the tone of your social media is responsible, transparent, informative, visual (video and infographics), simple, and sincere. It is also important to determine who in your organization is approved to post on social media.

Facebook – Use Facebook to inform and engage your target audiences. With Facebook, you can:

- Link to relevant news stories, blog posts, and websites that may interest your audiences
- Post current or upcoming events, interesting facts, personal messages, quotes from leadership and other items that will benefit your audiences
- Closely monitor comments and engage when appropriate
- Participate in the official pages of various stakeholders

Twitter – The best use of Twitter may be to engage media, others in the nonprofit sector, government officials, and community and business influencers. With Twitter you can:

- Send short news clips and images
- Follow federal, state, and local officials and re-tweet as appropriate
- Reply to mentions as appropriate
- Use unique hashtags to help people follow your updates
- Use third-party microblog services to easily manage your site – such as www.tweetdeck.com or www.hootsuite.com.

Of course, there are other social media platforms that may meet your needs such as LinkedIn, Instagram, You Tube, WhatsApp, Snapchat, TikTok, and WeChat.

Already using social media

If you are already using social media, look at what you have accomplished and ask yourself these basic questions:

- What's working?
- What's not working?
- Who's connecting with you on social media?
- Which social media sites does your target audience use?

This information will give you a good starting point for planning how to improve your results and give you a clear picture of how to move forward. You may find that your social media needs a strategic redirection, or it may be an outdated channel that is no longer worth your time and resources. To evaluate a social media channel, ask yourself the following:

- Is my audience here?

- If so, how are they using this platform?
- Can I use this vehicle to help achieve my goals?

Asking these questions will help keep your social media strategy on track as you grow your presence.

What about blogging?

Some would argue that blogging is not really a social media platform. But whether or not you consider it a part of social media, blogging is one of the most important communication tools for an organization. And once you get the hang of it, blogging is pretty easy to do.

A blog should allow for meaningful comments and engagement. Depending on the post, you can incorporate video, photos, infographics, and other pieces of information. Facebook and Twitter, as well as your other social media platforms, should drive people to the blog to enhance the discussion. You can also write blog posts and place them on other sites, which should drive people back to your website. This strategy is like placing opinion pieces in newspapers.

Blogging should not be used to promote your organization, but to position you as an expert. When you write a blog consistently, you will have original content that you can repurpose over and over again, especially on other social media platforms.

Once you start blogging, look for other bloggers that focus on your mission and comment on their blogs. The goal is to get people interested in your organization so they start to mention you on their blogs. As you develop relationships with bloggers, offer your original content for their blogs. You can also ask them to be guest bloggers on yours.

In time, you'll find that you're "all over the web." Word travels very fast in cyberspace – both good and bad – so be sure to provide quality information that will help people. After a while, you will find your own voice and learn how to tell your own stories. Although blogging allows you to share your expertise with others, it still takes time to build your credibility. Contrary to popular belief, most blogs do not "go viral" overnight.

Develop a content calendar

Create a social media content calendar that lists the dates and times at which you will publish content on each platform. A calendar is the perfect place to plan all your social media activities. A calendar ensures your posts are spaced out appropriately and published at the optimal times. It should include both your day-to-day posts and your content for social media campaigns.

If you are not sure what types of content to post, try the 80-20 rule:

- 80 percent of your posts should inform, educate, or entertain your target audience.
- 20 percent can directly promote your organization.

You can also use the social media rule of thirds:

- One-third of your social media content promotes your organization.
- One-third shares ideas and stories from thought leaders in your sector.
- One-third involves personal interaction with your target audiences.

Develop a social media policy

Even though every organization will have its own policies for using social media, the points below can guide your discussion of what you want to include in your organization's policy:

- The person in the organization who has the responsibility for your social media program
- Those in the organization who can post to your accounts
- A statement on expected etiquette while using social media – for example: respect for others, no hate speech, no sharing of unflattering information about other organizations, only true, fact-based material
- Restrictions related to the use of copyrighted material including literary works, photographs, videos, and graphic material
- Protection of privacy and confidentiality
- Any statement on board and staff posting about your organization on their personal sites
- Process for managing negative posts, misinformation, confidential information, or other questionable content about your organization on other sites
- Policies and procedures for using social media accounts in the event of a reputational or operational crisis that your organization may face
- Security protocols
- Process for reviewing your social media policies and guidelines with staff, board, and volunteers
- Statement that policies and guidelines will be reviewed and revised annually (or other appropriate timeline)

Some final thoughts

Just because you can use social media, does not mean you should. Social media is a great way to leverage your other communication activities but not replace them. Always ask yourself: Is this communication vehicle right for my organization? Do not spend your resources – in either money or staff – that are not generating value for your organization.

The major challenge that nonprofits face when using social media is consistency. You have to post frequently and on a schedule. If you want to be effective, not only do you need to post, but also follow conversations. Make sure you can maintain a social media presence. It is so easy to lose focus, especially in small organizations. Implementation is the whole ballgame.

Social media may shrink the universe, but it is not the silver bullet that some may think. Always consider your primary audience. Whether you use social media or not, you still need to build lasting relationships with the people you care about and who care about your mission.