

Social Media Use and Ethics

BY DAVE TINKER, CFRE



Using the Internet and social media for any type of research, fundraising and constituent engagement can be a Pandora's box. It is great to have lots of data available at your fingertips. In addition to the traditional information you could get from a wealth screening, you now can know almost as much as you ever wanted to about an individual, company or organization. Social media allows you to share everything, from your relationship status to photos of pets and children to political leanings. It enables you to have greater engagement with your constituents. Personal information is more readily available today than at any other time in history.

Therein lies the problem. Sometimes, people overshare their information on social media. This can place you—and your organization—in a sticky ethical situation. There are quite a few factors you need to take into consideration when it comes to using the Internet and social media to avoid finding yourself in an ethical conundrum. Three key areas are privacy;

friending or following constituents on social media; and the type of information you are researching or learning about a constituent.

1. Privacy

Privacy continues to be of the utmost importance. It is amazing how many donors and volunteers do not know how much information is truly public. What was once found only on paper in a county courthouse is now easily accessible online. Donor lists are easily found in online PDF files. Naïve as it may be, many people who use social media do so with the idea that most, if not all, the information they use is private and should not be shared. Consider one situation that occurred during last winter's holidays. Randi Zuckerberg posted a photo of her family standing around an island in a kitchen on Facebook. Within minutes, the photo had been seen, copied and posted to Twitter by someone who was a friend of a friend of Randi's. If you do not recognize the name, Randi Zuckerberg was the director of marketing for Facebook and is the sister of Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg. Because of automated changes to her privacy settings during a Facebook update, her photos, which she thought could be seen only by a few friends, were seen and shared by others. Randi reached out to the person on Twitter and commented that "it wasn't cool" that the photo had been shared on Twitter. The person who posted the photo promptly took it down.

If Facebook's former director of marketing found the privacy tools confusing, do you think your donors and constituents will as well? Information shared by your friends—and friends

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of friends—sometimes is not meant to be seen by others. Being an ethical practitioner, you need to keep this in consideration when viewing personal information on social media.

Additional privacy concerns include communicating with constituents via social media in a nonprivate method. Messaging one another on social media platforms can at times leave the private or privileged information open to public eyes. Additionally, when your constituents or their families share information on your charity's social media pages, they can be unaware that their private information is possibly out in the open for all to see. Following common guidelines about posting photos, video and audio to social media, including photos, videos and audio releases or waivers, can help you avoid posting personally identifiable information that was meant to be kept private. For instance, items in the background or foreground of a photo and metadata of a picture, such as a time stamp or geographic tag, can and will show others when and where a photo was taken. If you or a donor do not want this to be made public, do not post it.

2. Friending or following constituents on social media

Being on social media and being friends with constituents is another important issue. This does not mean managing your organization's social media site and having people like or follow it. This is about being friends or following someone from a personal account. Your nonprofit organization should have a social media policy already in place. That policy should at least address the issue of friending or following constituents. However, if your organization does not yet have a social media policy in place, it is not alone. (See the "Resources" box for information on social media policies.)

Some people think it is great to have many social media connections with people they serve, their family members, donors and prospects, but that can leave you and your organization open to ethical issues. First, by friending people from this group with your

personal account, you are allowing them to see very detailed information about you, and vice versa. You will be able to learn about their relatives; see family photos; read data on their age, religion, employment and education; and view addresses, to name a few. Having access to all this information may make it easier for you to personalize your conversations and requests of the individuals, right? Maybe, but you must be vigilant.

If you are serving children who are teenagers—the age group of children who are most likely to be using social media—are they friending you, or are you friending them? When it comes to involving a minor, should you have their parents' permission first? Beware of friending teens on social media to avoid any potential ethical issues.

Friending your constituents also may create ethical dilemmas. For example, suppose you see posted health information. What would you do as a fundraiser if you found out that a donor you were connected to via social media was visiting a gerontologist who specializes in dementia? Would that affect the way you speak with your donor about making a donation? Would you bring it up during a cultivation meeting or conversation? Would you tell others at your organization? You cannot

tell from the posted information if it is actually the donor who has health issues. Perhaps he or she is visiting the specialist to get information for a relative's condition.

When you are friending people on social media through your personal account, what are your real motives? Are you doing so to learn as much about them as possible to benefit your work and fill in all of the fields in your constituent database, or are you truly friends? Do you want them to know more about you? Remember, everything you write on social media remains somewhere online. Even if you delete it from the social media platform, it is stored somewhere. Keep in mind that the U.S. Library of Congress is cataloging every single Twitter post ever tweeted by Americans since 2006. Every single one.

3. The type of information you are researching or learning about a constituent

The veracity of information is a third key issue. Just as when you hire a prospect research consultant to obtain information, and the consultant tries to be 100 percent sure that the information is accurate, there can be an error: Information you learn via social media is not always true. Occasionally, executives and corporate heads have public

Resources

AFP Social Media Guidelines

www.afpnet.org/files/ContentDocuments/SocialMediaGuidelines.pdf

The Social Media Handbook: Rules, Policies and Best Practices to Successfully Manage Your Organization's Social Media Presence, Posts and Potential by Nancy Flynn (Pfeiffer, 2012), hardcover, 384 pages

Navigating Social Media Legal Risks: Safeguarding Your Business by Robert McHale, Esq. (Que Publishing, 2012), paperback, 320 pages

Nonprofit Social Media Policy Workbook

<http://idealware.org/reports/nonprofit-social-media-policy-workbook>

"Ten Issues to Address in Your Nonprofit's Social Media Policy"

www.nonprofitlawblog.com/home/2013/03/10-issues-to-address-in-your-nonprofits-social-media-policy.html

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relations and marketing firms writing posts on their behalf. Sometimes, people are more boastful online about business or personal success.

While employers and colleges are increasingly turning to social media to learn more about a candidate or student, the students and job applicants now know to set up two separate social media accounts. One account is for the hiring manager or admissions counselor to view. It is scrubbed clean of anything that may portray the student or candidate in a bad light, preventing admission or hiring. The other account is the one they share with their friends. Which one are you able to access? Are you seeing a constituent's sanitized account? It is hard to discern what may be actual fact or when someone is being facetious if you do not look at the entire scope of someone's postings.

Because there is such ready access to

vast amounts of information today, it can put you, the fundraiser, in a very difficult ethical situation. Privacy, friending constituents and the types of information you gather are all key ethical issues. It is important to remember that AFP's *Social Media Guidelines*, as well as the *AFP Code of Ethical Principles and Standards*, can help you if you find yourself in an ethical situation because of social media. The goal of AFP's *Social Media Guidelines* is not only to give fundraising professionals guidance on social media for their workplace but also to establish guidelines for organization leaders to use with their staff, consul-

tants, volunteers, members, stakeholders and affiliated groups. The document also covers the conduct and expectations of the public when participating in an organization's social media or social networking platforms.

While there is a different scenario for every circumstance, using the *Social Media Guidelines* and the code of ethics can help you make the right ethical decision and help you stay out of sticky situations. ☺

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