

ANR Communications/MSU Extension Social Media Guidelines

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Introduction

Social media is, at its core, a conversation. MSU Extension (MSUE) educators, specialists, program associates and support staffers should be present in the online conversations happening around our areas of expertise, our communities and the greater online world. In some instances we may be in the familiar role of providing information and education, but more often, expect to add your opinion, thoughts or ideas to blog posts, Facebook status updates, Twitter “tweets” or Ning discussions with others, and expect other people to comment to you and to the broader community about your statements.

Rather than presenting a strict policy, MSUE is providing guidelines that are designed to frame acceptable and encouraged uses for MSUE staff members in new social media spaces.

Note: These guidelines do not supersede any existing MSU, MSUE or county government policy that employees are expected to have read and understand.

Using Social Media: It’s All About Common Sense

First and foremost, as with any aspect of your life, use common sense when using social media in your personal or professional endeavors.

- Don’t conceal your identity or profession if your account, comment, reply or post is related to your job in any way.
- Share your thoughts, ideas and information with others in a respectful way. Don’t forget that written communication does not have tone. Therefore it can be hard to interpret meaning from online communication—especially brief statements like Twitter “tweets” and Facebook status updates.
- Use personal contact information for accounts that are strictly non-work related or accounts that are a blend of professional and personal information.
- Use professional contact information for accounts that represent a component of your employment, such as an MSUE program or initiative.
- If you’re not sure whether to use your personal or professional contact information, err on the side of using your personal information.
- There’s no such thing as private information on the Internet. Assume that everyone will see everything you post. Do not write anything that you would not show to your significant other, your mother or your boss.
- Part of participating in social media is to let some of your personality show so that others will want to engage with you. Communicating about personal, non work-related topics can help show your personality and encourage engagement, but don’t let “talking” about personal things become a habit that keeps you from getting your work done.

Be Responsible for What You Write

Use good judgment and common sense. In an online environment, people are not required to use their real identities, making it is easier for them to make provocative, inflammatory or antagonistic statements without concern for others. Avoid falling into this trap by not saying anything you would not say to someone in person in a public setting (again, there’s no such thing as a private comment on the Internet).

Example: “Not all of my colleagues may agree with my opinion on this, and I respect their rights to do so, but I believe that it is perfectly acceptable to eat yesterday’s leftover donuts for breakfast.”

Show ‘em the Real You

Don’t try to hide your identity or affiliation when your social media participation has anything to do with your job.

Example: “I’m Dan Marktonio and I’m an agricultural educator for MSU Extension in Green County.” NOT “I work for a university.”

Consider Your Audience

The Internet is not usually the right place for scholarly writing. Instead, write in a conversational manner.

Remember that everyone has access to everything on the Internet. Make it understandable by avoiding or defining jargon. While you may think you’re writing for a farmer audience, consider how others will interpret what you’ve written.

The way you participate in social media may differ depending on who is part of that particular “space.” For instance, the complexity of your language and the topics you broach on a Facebook site for 4-H youth should differ from the language and topics you broach on a Facebook site intended for Extension educators or legislators.

Speak as yourself, but don’t forget to acknowledge connections

The lines between your personal and professional life will continue to blur from black and white to grey.

Use a disclaimer like “The views expressed on this [blog, Web site, profile] are mine alone and do not necessarily reflect the views of Michigan State University Extension.”

At the same time, when you are speaking or writing in your professional role, don’t forget to avoid making claims that may appear to endorse commercial products or services, political parties or viewpoints or religious affiliations.

Respect Copyrights and Fair Use

Find a funny saying you’d like to share? Want to link a story to a Dilbert comic you recently read? Make sure that you credit your sources, and in the case of copyrighted items, observe all rights.

When using Flickr, respect the articles of use for photos in the Creative Commons, which give viewers options for using images, often without paying a fee in noncommercial uses (but often requesting credit and permission).

If a site offers widgets that allow you to share content via social networking sites like Facebook, De.li.cious or Reddit, it’s okay to use them that way, but if you are cutting and copying or considering using a screen capture, make sure it’s an acceptable use.

What about photographs?

If you are the photographer, it’s okay, of course, to post your photos on your social media sites, but be aware that others might choose to use them without your permission. If you don’t want your photos shared widely, don’t post them.

Before you post someone else's pictures, make sure that you have their permission.

Also, if your photos include recognizable faces taken at a non-public event, you should get a photo release from those subjects prior to posting those photos. If the photos were taken at a public event, you don't need a photo release, but if it is possible to get one, you may want to do so anyway.

If your photos include recognizable faces of youth under the age of 18, get a photo release from their parent or guardian. Although not strictly required for photos of youth taken in a public place or at a public event, if the circumstances allow, you should try to obtain a release anyway.

With or without a signed photo release, it may be best when posting pictures of minors to avoid using first and last names to identify the youth; using first names only could be an acceptable alternative. Exceptions may include indentifying youth for captions of photos used in newspapers or for youth award winners.

Protect Confidential and Proprietary Information.

There's a difference between being transparent and giving away information before it's ready for general distribution. If you're not sure, just ask.

Tweet: "I'm presenting about corn variety trials at a field day in Saginaw today." NOT "Monsanto's corn variety did the best in our MSU Extension variety trials this year. Better stock up!"

Add Value

It's ingrained in what we do...bringing knowledge to life. You have access to groundbreaking, research-based information. Use social media tools to bring that knowledge to both new and existing stakeholders. Use photos, link to published works by MSU experts (acknowledging authors) and share what you have learned in meetings, workshops and through simple discussions with your colleagues.

Productivity Matters

Remember that everyone can see what you do, and when you do it. If you don't want your colleagues to know that you are addicted to WordScramble and your Farmville property is about to be overtaken by developers, then you probably should not play Facebook games during business hours.

Make social media a part of your workflow. Tell your supervisor, co-workers and counterparts that you're incorporating social media into your work. Show them how it is contributing to your professional pursuits. Remember that to make your social media endeavors successful, you need to find the right balance between social media and other work.

Managing a Social Media Site

When, as part of your job, you manage a blog, Facebook fan or group site, or another site that allows participants to post comments or original posts and represents a component of MSUE in an "official" way, you need to monitor posts from other participants. When a post is inappropriate, blatantly commercial, obscene, or endangers someone, as site administrator it is your job to remove the offending posts. However, avoid the temptation to remove posts that are merely critical, angry or represent a different opinion. Remember, a social media site is a means for holding a conversation. Suppressing other points of view may be a quick way to lose readers' trust.

Working with Youth and Other Vulnerable Populations

MSU Extension is often engaged with youth and other vulnerable populations. These audiences present unique obligations for protecting their privacy in social media settings.

- Volunteers who have been through MSUE's volunteer selection process and are engaged in activities where they are representing MSUE, are covered by MSUE's media release forms/procedures.

Example: When a 4-H volunteer takes photos (or video or audio) of 4-H youth participating in 4-H activities, and parents/guardians of those youth have already signed an MSUE media release form, the photos taken by the volunteer may be posted in an official MSUE social media site and used in the same capacity as a photo taken by an MSUE staff person.

- If an MSUE volunteer or staff person takes photos (or video or audio) at an official MSUE event or activity in their capacity as a volunteer or employee of MSUE, and those photos are posted on a social media site that is NOT an official MSUE social media site, that usage is NOT covered by an MSUE media release form.

Example: An MSUE volunteer serving as a youth mentor takes photos of youth and their mentors at an official MSUE activity, and then posts those photos on his/her personal Facebook page. That usage is not covered by the MSUE media release.

- If a parent/guardian of a youth involved in an official MSUE activity or event takes photos (or video or audio) of their youth and other youth at the activity/event, and those photos are posted on a social media site that is not an official MSUE site, that usage is not covered by an MSUE media release form, even if all of the participants have signed MSUE media releases.
- By the same token, if a participant in an official MSUE activity takes photos (or video or audio) of other participants and posts them on a social media site that is not an official MSUE site, that usage is not covered by an MSUE media release form, even if all of the participants have signed MSUE media releases.
- Saying a usage is not covered by an MSUE media release form does not prohibit that usage from taking place. It just means that the person who engaged in that usage is not protected from legal or civil action by an MSUE media release form.

Things that are posted on official MSUE social media sites, including text, photos, videos or audio, WILL be shared. They will be linked to, copied and cut and pasted. While MSUE needs to keep watch for misuse of the MSUE brand and sub-brands, the general intent of social networking is to have our messages shared in an ever-widening circle. This sharing necessitates the loss of some measure of control, but the trade-off is that we reach new audiences that could benefit from MSU Extension programs.

Find a general photo, audio and video release at:

http://anrc.com.msu.edu/Portals/0/docs/photo_audio_video_release.pdf

Find a 4-H media release at:

<http://web1.msue.msu.edu/msue/cyf/youth/downloads/Medical-MediaRelease.pdf>