Social Media Practices and Guidelines

As organizations embrace social media, they find it to be a practical way to communicate with the communities they serve. In many ways, social media has allowed people to get a feel for the organization, its culture and its personality from the comfort of their own home.

Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, websites, and text alerts – with the various social media platforms available today, it may seem overwhelming trying to figure out where to begin, and you may feel overwhelmed as you begin your journey into this new arena as well.

However, if employed correctly, these platforms can be used to communicate with participants.

Social media can connect volunteers, staff and participants in ways that were previously impossible. Individuals who have questions or volunteers who need to discuss details of an upcoming event can now continue their conversations from home. And social media provides these services at very little cost.

Develop a Plan

With all the benefits and opportunities social media has to offer, it should not be entered into lightly. Having a well thought out plan is key to creating a successful social media effort. While stepping into the social media pool may seem like a daunting task, it should truly be an extension of your current communication strategy. Keeping this in mind will make it easier to get started and keep your plan in line with the goals you've already set for your organization.

Decide what you want social media to accomplish for you. It could be you want to provide a platform on which your members will be able to stay connected throughout the week, or you may want to have a way to announce and promote upcoming events. Whatever your purpose, develop your strategy around that principle.

Define Your Audience

Identifying your audience will be important as you decide on which platforms you should be using to get your message out. Think about the information your audience will want to receive, how often they will want to be updated and the best way to deliver that information to them. Are you trying to connect with volunteers? If so, then they might need updates on event locations and times, prayer requests, and other special needs. If you're seeking to engage the community at large, they might want links to the latest videos or blog posts, as well as information on upcoming events. Make sure your audience is receiving the information in a format useful to them and maintain regular contact.

Identify Appropriate Platforms

Once you have established your audience, you will be able to decide which platforms are appropriate for you to use. For example, if you have decided to focus on reaching the youth you serve, this segment of the population typically comes highly equipped with cell phones. Therefore, being able to send text alerts with information on events or last-minute volunteer needs might be

ideal. Or, if you have a staff member who is committed to blogging and is a skilled writer, creating a blog may be a good fit for your social media plan.

However, just because there are numerous platforms available and free to use, does not mean an organization has to incorporate all of them into their plan, or begin using them all at the same time. These dynamic sites require constant monitoring and input to be effective. The best way to be successful with social media is to use the correct platforms for your message and objective and remain consistent. At first, especially if you have limited time and staff, it may be best to start slowly and use only the platforms you are comfortable with.

Define Your Process and Policies

It has been said before, but social media is not an area to jump into lightly. If it is a vehicle your organization decides to move forward with, treat it like you would any other communications or building plan and create a well-defined roll out plan and communication process. Decide how much time you and your staff have to devote to social media, and if you are finding it hard to fit time into your current schedule, then it may not be the right time for your organization to begin a social media push.

Because these sites are open to the public, anything can happen. Users can post negative comments about your organization, or you could accidentally post a broken link or incorrect information. While we hope this never happens, establishing guidelines and having a policy in place will help keep everyone on the same page and aware of what is expected from them.

Be sure to define what is acceptable, not only for those who are following, but also for staff members who are allowed to comment or create content for the platforms. Be clear in defining your consequences for violating these rules. Some sample site guidelines include:

- Administrators should be adults.
- Consider having at least two administrators for each site, which will allow you to have a quick response time, as well as constant monitoring of your sites.
- Keep all passwords in a central location so there is always easy access to them. More than one adult should know where this information is located and have access to it.
- Identify the writer of each communication posted. This helps avoid appearing as if a message is the opinion of the organization or a higher authority.
- Get permission from all people in a picture, video or any other type of media before posting it.
- Get parental permission before communicating with a minor via any social media platform, or posting pictures, videos or other information in which they are included or associated with.
- Keep copies of any communications sent to minors on file, whether it be Facebook messages or wall conversations, or text messages, including conversations had between a church staff member and a minor, whenever possible.
- Define a contact person in the event incorrect information regarding your organization is posted online or found on another site.
- Create a standard response to negative comments you may receive, as well as how to handle feedback or other questions.

Measure Your Results

The true purpose of entering the social media realm is to grow your audience and increase awareness of your organization. As you begin to develop your social media plan, it is imperative you include a way to measure your success. It is important to keep in mind there is no proven way to measure your return on investment with social media like there is with standard advertising, and success can mean different things to different people. So, determine how you will know if your new platform is successful by deciding what success means to your organization. If success to you equals increased attendance, then you'll want to be sure to track attendance numbers before and during your social media campaigns. If success is measured in the number of followers you have on

Instagram or your blog, or the number of replies you are getting to your Facebook posts, you'll want to be sure to track those areas as well.

Obtain Support from Your Constituents

Social media is a broad term and can be overwhelming or even scary to some. Getting your people on board and excited about your new plans to engage in this arena may be difficult, but it is critical to make the campaign a success. Be open and honest about your plans and let people know which platforms you are planning to use and what purpose they will serve. By showing them how they will benefit the organization and everyone, it may help encourage engagement. Gaining a loyal core group of followers who are engaging in conversations on your platforms has the potential to interest outside users to begin following you as well. With so many active users, social media offers visibility to an organization that wasn't previously possible and may help your organization grow in ways you never imagined.

1111 Ashworth Rd / West Des Moines, IA 50265 / 1.877.448.4331 / GuideOne.com

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