

SOCIAL MEDIA GUIDELINES – UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS

Introduction

These guidelines are offered as a synthesis of best practices. They include material compiled from church entities, for-profit corporations, and non-profit organizations. Suggestions and comments are welcome at CommDept@uscgb.org.

In this document, “church personnel” is defined as anyone—priest, deacon, religious, bishop, lay employee, or volunteer—who provides ministry or service or is employed by an entity associated with the Catholic Church.

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Guiding Principles

"Communication is a means of expressing the missionary vocation of the entire Church; today the social networks are one way to experience this call to discover the beauty of faith, the beauty of encountering Christ. In the area of communications too, we need a Church capable of bringing warmth and of stirring hearts" (**Pope Francis' Message for the 48th World Communications Day [WCD], 2014**).

Social media is fundamentally changing how people communicate. Our Church cannot ignore it; in fact, it is our responsibility as Catholics to bring the Church's teachings into what Pope Benedict XVI called the "digital continent."

As Pope Francis wrote in the **48th World Communications Day message**, "The revolution taking place in communications media and in information technologies represents a great and thrilling challenge; may we respond to that challenge with fresh energy and imagination as we seek to share with others the beauty of God."

The Church can use social media to encourage respect, dialogue, and honest relationships—in other words, "true friendship" (**Pope Benedict XVI's Message for the 43rd World Communications Day, 2009**). To do so requires us to approach social media as a powerful means of evangelization and to consider the Church's role in providing a Christian perspective on digital literacy.

Before beginning work on social media guidelines, consider reading all of the World Communications Day messages issued since 2006, since each message focuses on social media.

The Church and Social Media: An Overview

Social media offer both opportunities and challenges to Catholic organizations. These can be grouped into three primary categories:

- Visibility
- Community
- Accountability

Visibility

Online social media communities are vast and are growing at a rapid pace. For example, there are now more active Facebook accounts than there are Catholics, worldwide. Given the size and scope of these communities, they offer excellent forums for the Church's visibility and evangelization.

The key question that faces each church organization that decides to engage social media is, How will we engage?

Careful consideration should be made to determine the particular strengths of each form of social media (blogs, social networks, text messaging, etc.) and the needs of a ministry, parish, or organization. The strengths should match the needs. For instance, a blog post may not be the most effective way to remind students of an event. However, a mass text message to all students and their parents telling them that the retreat begins at 9 a.m. may be very effective.

Because of the high volume of content and sites and the dynamics of search engines and computer networking, social media require constant input and monitoring to make the Church's presence effective. To keep members, a social networking site such as a blog needs to have new content on a regular basis. In the case of social media, the axiom "build it and they will come" is not applicable. It may seem paradoxical, when considering the fluidity of social media, but good planning and strategizing is as essential, if not more so, when approaching social media, versus traditional media.

Community

Social media can be powerful tools for strengthening community, although social media interaction should not be viewed as a substitute for face-to-face gatherings. Social media can support communities in a myriad of ways: connecting people with similar interests, sharing information about in-person events, providing ways for people to engage in dialogue, etc.

The use of social media should be well integrated into the overall communication strategy for the organization. Users move seamlessly across multiple platforms, receiving information and entering into dialogue using print, oral, video, and digital communications, in a variety of settings. Effective communication strategies recognize the expectations and preferences of the community and develop messages suited to those expectations and preferences.

A well-considered use of social media has the ultimate goal of encouraging "an authentic culture of encounter" (WCD message, 2014), or, to use the parlance of the practitioners, "creating engagement."

With the rapid acceptance of digital social networks, the "digital continent" has become very crowded. The Church can be successful in being heard above the fray by creating engagement. Engagement is defined as the activity that happens around a message posted on a social network. This activity includes likes, comments, and shares. The more engagement that happens on a particular message, the more it will be seen.

Accountability

Social media provide tools for building community. Membership in communities also requires accountability and responsibility. Users of social media expect site administrators to allow dialogue, to provide information, and to acknowledge mistakes. The explosion of information available to social media consumers has meant that they often only use information from trusted sites or sites recommended by those whom they trust.

While not every demand or inquiry can be met, it is important that creators and site administrators of social media understand both how much social media are different from mass media and the expectations of their consumers. Creators and consumers of mass media generally accept their one-way conversations (letters to the editor being the exception). Social media's emphasis is on the word "social," with a general blurring of the distinction between creators of content and consumers of content. Many communication experts are describing the adaption of social media as a paradigm shift in how humans communicate, a development as important as that of the printing press and the innovation of electronic communication.

Definitions

Definitions provide clarity and a common language. They are even more important in guidelines for social media, since the usage of terms is rapidly evolving.

- **Web 2.0:**
The term “Web 2.0” is commonly associated with Web applications that facilitate interactive information sharing. A Web 2.0 site allows its users to interact with other users, to change website content, to provide reaction to content, to share the site’s content with others, or to filter content being provided by the site creator. This is in contrast with non-interactive websites, where users are limited to the passive viewing of information that is provided to them. * Example: Amazon.com’s inclusion of users’ reviews and offering of recommendations based on the consumer’s past use of the site make it a Web 2.0 site.
- **Blog:**
A blog (a contraction of the term “web log”) is a type of website, usually maintained by an individual, with regular entries of commentary, descriptions of events, or other material such as graphics or video. Entries are commonly displayed in reverse-chronological order. “Blog” can also be used as a verb, meaning to maintain or add content to a blog. * Examples: There are many types of blogs on sites throughout the Internet. They are common for celebrities, writers, journalists, etc. WordPress is one of the more popular tools used to create blogs.
- **Micro-blog:**
This form of multimedia blogging allows users to send brief text updates or to publish micromedia such as photos or audio clips, to be viewed either by anyone or by a restricted group, which can be chosen by the user. These messages can be submitted by a variety of means, including text messaging, instant messaging, e-mail, digital audio, or through a Web interface. The content of a micro-blog differs from a traditional blog in that it is typically smaller in actual size and aggregate file size. A single entry could consist of a single sentence or fragment, an image, or a ten-second video. * Example: Twitter is a form of micro-blogging in which entries are limited to 140 characters.
- **Social network:**
A social network is a Web 2.0 site that is entirely driven by content of its members. Individuals are allowed flexibility in privacy settings; in posting text, photos, video, links, and other information; and in level of interaction with other members. * Examples: Facebook, LinkedIn, MySpace, Twitter, YouTube, and Flickr are often included in lists of social networking sites, although sometimes YouTube and Flickr are designated as multimedia sharing sites, while Twitter is currently more often designated as a micro-blogging application.
- **Ministry website:**³
An Internet website/tool created by employees, clerics, and volunteers for the sole purpose of conducting diocesan/affiliate business.
- **Personal website:**
A social network page, blog, or any Internet website/tool created by employees, clerics, and volunteers primarily to share personal communication with friends and associates.

Guidelines

When developing guidelines for church personnel to use social media, consider including the following elements:

- **Define appropriate boundaries for communications.**

These should be in sync with diocesan codes of conduct for other areas, such as the diocese's standards for protection of children and young people, Internet acceptable use policies, etc. Define what is considered confidential information, verifiable consent, personal identifiable information, contact with a minor, etc. Topics that are in current debate will generate more comments/responses. These include issues in which the Church's teachings are often in contrast to some popular positions (gay rights, abortion, immigration reform, health care reform). In other words, the Church's social justice teachings, including the pro-life aspects of those teachings, often elicit unfavorable comments. Some people determine that those topics will not be engaged with on official sites. Others provide guidance on how to engage in dialogue around these topics. (See "Rules of the Road" below for examples.)

- **Include examples of Codes of Conduct**

That should be posted on social networking sites. Codes of Conduct are for visitors to the site. These codes should always be brief and immediately apparent to visitors. Visitors should also be made aware of the consequences of violations of the Code of Conduct. The Code of Conduct on the USCCB's Facebook site is as follows: "All posts and comments should be marked by Christian charity and respect for the truth. They should be on topic and presume the good will of other posters. Discussion should take place primarily from a faith perspective. No ads please." Always block anyone who does not abide by the Code of Conduct.

- **Define instructions.**

Include instructions on how to report, block, etc., on the more popular social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter. This provides guidance for those church personnel who may be entering into social media for the first time.

- **Provide recommendations on how to deal with difficult "fans."**

Give church personnel permission to trust their instincts on blocking repeat offenders of a site's Code of Conduct. Argumentative participants can easily change the tone of every post. A good way to determine if they should be blocked is to go to their profiles and browse through the pages that they have "fanned." Do not allow those unwilling to dialogue to hold your site and its other members hostage. In particular situations, the moderator might determine it is best to ask a member to take a conversation "offline." These offline conversations can be conducted in person, over the telephone, or through private e-mail. The site moderators should be able to refer to the appropriate resources, such as the pastor, program director, diocesan communication office, etc.

- **Provide trusted sites for reference, and recommend that site administrators have a thorough knowledge of these sites.**

Often a link to the parish, diocesan, USCCB, or Vatican site can provide necessary information, thereby helping redirect the tone and substance of an online conversation.

- **Remind site administrators they are posting for a broad audience.**

Social media are global platforms. Online content is visible to anyone in the world who comes to their sites.

- **Establishing a Site**

Websites or social networking profile pages (also called accounts, fan pages, or group pages) are the centerpiece of any social media activity. The following are recommended guidelines for the establishment of a site. These can apply to a profile or fan page on a social networking site such as Facebook, a blog, a Twitter account, etc.

- Site administrators should be adults.
- There should be at least two site administrators (preferably more) for each site, to allow rapid response and continuous monitoring of the site.
- Do not use personal sites for diocesan or parish programs. Create separate sites for these. This includes Facebook.
- Passwords and names of sites should be registered in a central location, and more than one adult should have access to this information.
- Be sure those establishing a site know these key "Rules of the Road":
 1. Abide by diocesan/parish guidelines.
 2. Know that even personal communication by church personnel reflects the Church. Practice what you preach.
 3. Write in first person. Do not claim to represent the official position of the organization or the teachings of the Church, unless authorized to do so.
 4. Identify yourself. Do not use pseudonyms or the name of the parish, program, etc., as your identity, unless authorized to do so.
 5. Abide by copyright, fair use, and IRS financial disclosure regulations.
 6. Do not divulge confidential information about others. Nothing posted on the Internet is private.
 7. Don't cite others, post photos or videos of them, link to their material, etc., without their approval.
 8. Practice Christian charity.

Social Networking with Minors

Be sure to have permission from a minor's parent or guardian before contacting the minor via social media or before posting pictures, video, and other information that may identify that minor.

Parents must have access to everything provided to their children. For example, parents should be made aware of how social media are being used, be told how to access the sites, and be given the opportunity to be copied on all material sent to their children via social networking (including text messages). While parents should be provided with the same material as their children, it does not have to be via the same technology (that is, if children receive a reminder via Twitter, parents can receive it in a printed form or by an e-mail list).

Church personnel should be encouraged to save copies of conversations whenever possible, especially those that concern the personal sharing of a teen or young adult. (This may be especially important with text messaging.)

Make everyone aware of the **Children's Online Privacy Protection Act**, which is federal legislation that oversees how websites interact with children under age 13.

Personal Sites

Personal sites of church personnel should also reflect Catholic values. Businesses are cautioning their employees that, while employees have a right to privacy and confidentiality regarding what their employers know about them, an employee's use of social networking—because of its very nature—means he or she relinquishes some privacy and could be construed as representing the company's ethics and values. Likewise, church personnel should be encouraged to understand that they are witnessing to the faith through all of their social networking, whether "public" or "private."

Many employers and church organizations ask their personnel to consider including a disclaimer on their personal sites, especially if employees/church personnel are highly visible in the community and/or post material related to church work/ministry on their personal sites. One example: “The views expressed on this site are mine alone and do not necessarily reflect the views of my employer.”

How to Report and Monitor

Ask church personnel to report unofficial sites that carry the diocesan or parish logo to the diocesan communication office or pastor. It is important that the owner (the diocese or the parish) is able to protect its brand and identity.

Inform church personnel whom to contact on the diocesan level (most likely the communication office) if they find misinformation on a site. This is especially important when responding to an incorrect wiki, such as Wikipedia, Masstimes.org, etc.

Have a clear policy on whether diocesan personnel should be expected to respond to defamatory, libelous, or slanderous comments—not original postings, but comments—on a site, such as a blog. Some policies indicate that the diocesan communication office will provide a response to a major news outlet’s blog or a popular blogger, but not to every comment on those blogs or to other bloggers.

Consider posting these and similar policies and notices on your organization’s social networks.

For media inquiries, e-mail us at commdept@usccb.org

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