



# The Ins and Outs of Digital Media: Tips for Youth-Serving Organizations

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This tip sheet covers guidelines for educating the teens you serve and the people you hire about how to leave a clean digital footprint and provides a model for creating a solid digital media policy. According to the Pew Research Center, 92% of teens (ages 13–17) report going online daily, and nearly 75% have access to a smartphone (Lenhart, 2015). This unprecedented and near-constant access to all things digital<sup>1</sup> has led to an explosion of social media options and vigorous adoption of those platforms.

Teens, in particular, are early and passionate adopters of many social media platforms. In fact, 76% of teens (ages 13-17) use social media, and most use multiple platforms, cross-posting content or posting different, curated content based on the channel (and who follows them/who they follow):

- Facebook remains the top social media platform, with 71% of teens reporting that they use the platform.
- 52% of teens report using Instagram.
- 41% of teens report using Snapchat.
- 31% of teens report using Twitter (Lenhart, 2015).

However, teens are not the only adopters of social media; their older counterparts are also enthusiastic users. Among online adults (ages 18 and older), 52% use two or more social media platforms:

- 71% of adults report using Facebook.
- 28% of adults report using Pinterest.

Social Media Channels Favored by Teens	
A conservative estimate is that there are hundreds of social media channels. The most popular channels are ones with which you may already be familiar. This short overview of some of the top channels used by teens is by no means exhaustive—and is guaranteed to change.	
<b>Anonymous Platforms</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ask.FM </li> <li>• Yik Yak </li> </ul>
<b>Discussion Board Platforms</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Digg </li> <li>• Reddit </li> </ul>
<b>Pinboard Platforms</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pinterest </li> </ul>
<b>Texting Platforms</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Kik </li> <li>• WhatsApp </li> </ul>
<b>Traditional Social Media Platforms</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Facebook </li> <li>• Instagram </li> <li>• Snapchat </li> <li>• Tumblr </li> <li>• Twitter </li> </ul>

- 26% of adults report using Instagram.
- 23% of adults report using Twitter (Duggan et al., 2015).

The force of social and digital media is strong, as is the likelihood that various new social media platforms will enter the market in the next few years. The boundary between public and private is becoming narrower and blurrier; as a result, it is important for youth-serving organizations to consider the reach and impact of digital media. There is a real opportunity to educate people—both the youth you serve and the people you employ—about safe and responsible digital media practices. In addition, enumerating rules, restrictions, and consequences for improper digital behavior can protect your organization and your brand.

## TIPS FOR LEAVING A CLEAN DIGITAL FOOTPRINT

A digital footprint is the trail or data that is left behind by users of the Internet. Although one's digital presence is not viewed with the same level of scrutiny that it once was, learning digital responsibility and creating a positive digital footprint are important skills to develop. Use the following guidelines to start a conversation with the youth you serve and the people with whom you work to emphasize the importance of leaving a clean digital footprint.

1. **Consider spelling and grammar.** Although digital language is always evolving and slang plays a major role in this casual form of communication, ultimately, if your content is not readable, your message will be lost. It may seem silly to instruct young people or employees to worry about spelling and grammar in something like a Facebook post, but the truth is that words (and images) are the only things people have to judge a person by in the digital world. Posts should be presented in a manner that elicits respect rather than scorn. This by no means suggests that slang or unusual spelling—when appropriate—are off limits. However, we suggest using caution and a careful eye to ensure that there is a balance between authentic digital media language and readability.
2. **Avoid hashtag-jacking.** Hashtags are designed to unify a conversation around a particular topic. They can and should be added to posts when appropriate. However, grabbing onto a hashtag—especially one that is being used to publicize a tragic or sensitive event—when not posting about that event is called hashtag-jacking. A notable example is when designer Kenneth Cole used the hashtag #Cairo in a Tweet about his new spring line; his goal was to sell merchandise, but attaching this marketing efforts to a hashtag focused on violent rioting in Egypt was insensitive, tone-deaf, and caused an Internet uproar (Ehrlich, 2011). Hashtag-jacking is the moral equivalent of forcing your way into a private conversation and then insisting on changing the subject; doing so is at best rude and at worst deeply offensive.
3. **Avoid posting content just to get likes.** Everyone wants to feel popular, whether it is in real life or in the digital world, but fishing for likes (i.e., posting outrageous content just to garner likes) is not the best choice. Build your digital following organically, by being yourself, not by posting attention-seeking content with which you are not truly connected.
4. **Avoid airing dirty laundry or sharing overly sensitive information.** Much like posting content simply to get likes, posting provocative or aggressive content is not a best practice. If everything on a particular newsfeed is based on complaints or attempts to pick fights, authenticity comes into question. Followers begin to lose trust in content and no longer engage with or track updates from your brand.
5. **Avoid public threats, fighting, or bullying.** Angry rants, threats, and negative behavior that a person may never engage in in real life are common on social media. It is easy to sling ugly words from behind a screen rather than face your victim, so encourage the youth you serve and your staff to consider confronting any issue privately rather than in the very public world of social media. Specifically, instruct

them that if they are posting on behalf of your organization, racist, threatening, or harassing language is not tolerated from your channels and will be dealt with immediately. Share examples of what you mean and be clear about your expectations of them as ambassadors of your organization/brands.

6. **Avoid posting pictures that feature inappropriate content.** Similar to text-based updates, any images should be appropriate. Avoid sharing images that show nudity, underage drinking, violence, or other inappropriate behavior. Sexting (i.e., posting sexually explicit images on social media) is an issue that can damage someone's reputation both in real life and in the digital world. If you are already having a conversation about online behavior, include a mention of sexting, the consequences of posting risqué selfies, and how apps like Snapchat are not totally private or a legitimate safeguard against images being widely shared.
7. **Avoid posting pictures in an inappropriate context.** The temptation to document every second of one's life is strong among avid social media users—even if that means posting in a place that is completely inappropriate, like posting a selfie at a concentration camp or live-tweeting a relative's funeral. The context of a photo is extremely important for social media. Solemn, somber locations and events are not meant for selfies; sharing your grief is fine—sharing it with a grinning selfie is not.
8. **Avoid public shaming/criticism.** Remember that the core principle of social media is that it is *social*. Once you hit send, assume that anyone and everyone can see your post. Tagging or naming specific people in updates (e.g., if someone wanted to talk badly about their principal, boss, or an educational program they want to get into) means that those specific people may see the negative comments and may make judgment calls about the poster based on those updates.
9. **Double-check that you are posting from the correct account.** Educate anyone you entrust with managing your corporate account(s) about the importance of posting from the correct platform. It is fine to manage several social media accounts—personal and professional—but impress upon young people and your staff the importance of double-checking any posts they make to ensure that their private updates are coming from *their* accounts. Accidentally posting a personal tweet on a corporate account can hurt the image and authority of your organization or brand.

## MODELLING GOOD BEHAVIOR

In addition to sharing these tips and having a conversation with the youth in your program, the best way to teach them about leaving a clean digital footprint is by modelling the behavior yourself. Be cautious about the content you post online and carefully consider whether you want to “friend” the youth in your program on your private social media platforms. The more walls you remove between yourself and the youth you serve, the more careful you should be about how you conduct yourself online.

## CREATING A DIGITAL MEDIA POLICY: WHY, WHEN, AND HOW

Many organizations have found it necessary to institute digital media policies governing when and whether employees can post to social media platforms on behalf of the organization, or even what they can post on their private accounts. You may want to consider whether your organization needs one. Before diving into the world of digital media policy, consider the pros and cons.

PROS	CONS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A written policy gives clear guidance to employees.</li> <li>• A written policy demonstrates consequences and guards against future liability.</li> <li>• A written policy can encourage a better public face of the organization (i.e., if employees are allowed to talk about your good work, you may reach a wider, more diverse audience than your corporate channel can reach alone).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A written policy can miss details; anything not specifically included in the policy could be considered fair game.</li> <li>• A written policy must be kept up to date; a policy that is not regularly updated is useless.</li> <li>• A written policy could constrain employees and keep them from fully embracing your organization/brand.</li> </ul>

## KEY QUESTIONS FOR DEVELOPING A DIGITAL MEDIA POLICY

**Does our organization need a digital media policy?** Your organization may want more control and oversight, and a formal policy can help. On the other hand, many organizations find it easier to use an informal policy like encouraging their employees to be discreet and thoughtful when using digital media, rather than requiring that any written policy be followed. This is a judgment call that should come from organizational leadership after careful consideration. Either way, having a policy in place—whether formal or informal, written or verbal—and educating staff and youth about the policy is key to protecting your organization.

**Does your policy cover personal accounts or only corporate accounts?** Once your organization has reached a decision on whether a policy is needed, the next question to ask is whether you want to govern personal digital interactions or just those interactions conducted through your corporate account(s). In general, you cannot govern what employees are saying on their own private channels, but you can certainly request that no one share updates or messaging about your organization other than those specifically tasked with speaking on behalf of your organization. This is an area where lines can be blurry, so the best course of action is often to keep open the lines of communication with your staff. Give them guidelines for what is considered appropriate, let them know when things are prohibited, and be clear about your expectations for staff who represent your organization. If staff are *not* allowed to speak on behalf of your organization, make that clear as well.

## 5 IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS FOR DEVELOPING A DIGITAL MEDIA POLICY

1. **Your organization’s mission.** Although the entire staff should be aware of your mission, it never hurts to offer a refresher to anyone using digital media on your behalf. Provide your overall mission statement, organizational goals, and any other general information that would benefit someone crafting messaging on behalf of your organization. There is no need to be overly prescriptive; just give a topline view of your organization’s main priorities.
2. **Your organization’s style guide.** If you have one, be sure to include your organization’s style guide in your digital media policy. This will lay out, in clear detail, how your organization communicates and it will demonstrate what topics, words, grammar, etc. are acceptable or off limits, which is a key component of any digital media policy. You should also include a conversation about tone: For example, if you cultivate a strictly serious tone in your corporate Twitter feed, but prefer to use humor and colloquial language in your young adult feed, make sure that is clearly explained (and consider using real examples to demonstrate the different tones).
3. **Roles and responsibilities.** Who manages your corporate digital media? Who is considered an organizational spokesperson? Who is allowed to make decisions about what is and is not acceptable to send out via digital media? Identify the primary communications team for your organization, including those who are allowed to speak to the press, those who primarily post for the organization, and those

to whom staff can go if they have questions about what is and is not acceptable to post about on digital media. Staff often want to verify that the language or messaging they are using does not violate any rules or regulations, and it is a good idea to give them clear direction about who to ask. Also include any additional rules and regulations that may govern the conduct of interns or volunteers.

4. **Response strategy.** Because digital media is, by nature, a public forum, the goal is for the public not only to see but also to interact with your updates. That means that you must have a plan in place for engaging with your followers. It is by no means mandatory that you—or your digital media team—respond to every question or comment you see on digital media. However, you should develop a strategy for interacting with some posts. Be mindful of the chance that engagement will take a negative turn. Have a separate plan in place to handle situations where your followers disagree with and challenge your work. In general, this is best left to your spokespeople or communications team, but if you allow your staff to handle their own negative interactions, be sure to guide them on how and when to engage with the public. One minor digital media gaffe can become a crisis without much prompting, so it is important to be careful in these situations. The United States Air Force has a flow chart infographic designed to help managers determine whether to respond to certain posts (U.S. Air Force, 2008).
5. **Best practices and consequences.** As you develop a better understanding of your digital media presence and what you expect from your team, continue to add lessons learned and best practices for managing digital media. If there are consequences for violating your organization’s digital media policy, list them clearly.

## NEXT STEPS

Once you have crafted your digital media policy, it may be useful to have it reviewed by a lawyer who can vet the document for any errors and strengthen the language. Recognize that no policy is ever final; review your digital media policy on at least an annual basis to take into account changes to your organization or to the digital media landscape. Finally, be sure you fully share it with all staff, including interns and volunteers, and consider requiring that they sign a form stating that they have read and understand the terms of the policy (this can be kept in their personnel file). Consider regularly training employees about the policy—and the consequences of violating it—so that all staff are aware of the rules.

See “Resources and Tools” for examples of good social digital policies and templates for creating your own policy.

## REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

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Resources and Tools
<p><b>Examples of Good Digital Media Policies</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adidas <a href="http://blog.adidas-group.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/adidas-Group-Social-Media-Guidelines1.pdf">http://blog.adidas-group.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/adidas-Group-Social-Media-Guidelines1.pdf</a></li> <li>• Associated Press <a href="http://www.ap.org/Images/Social-Media-Guidelines-7-24-2012_tcm28-8378.pdf">http://www.ap.org/Images/Social-Media-Guidelines-7-24-2012_tcm28-8378.pdf</a></li> <li>• Coca-Cola <a href="http://www.viralblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/01/TCCC-Online-Social-Media-Principles-12-2009.pdf">http://www.viralblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/01/TCCC-Online-Social-Media-Principles-12-2009.pdf</a></li> <li>• Social Media Governance Social Media Policy Database <a href="http://socialmediagovernance.com/policies/">http://socialmediagovernance.com/policies/</a></li> </ul>
<p><b>Tools</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• DigitalGov <a href="http://www.digitalgov.gov/">http://www.digitalgov.gov/</a></li> <li>• Policy Tool for Social Media <a href="http://socialmedia.policytool.net/">http://socialmedia.policytool.net/</a></li> </ul>

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<sup>1</sup> Note that “digital media” and “social media” are not interchangeable terms. Digital media refers to any media encoded in a machine-readable format: the broader category under which social media and other forms of communication—like texting—fall. Social media refers to a group of Internet-based applications that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content. Examples include Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat, etc.