GETTING SOCIAL SAVVY:

LEVERAGING SOCIAL MEDIA TO BOLSTER ENGAGEMENT IN SRAE PROGRAMS

Introduction

Social media networks are some of the most powerful communications channels available to Sexual Risk Avoidance Education (SRAE) programs. In addition to being cost-effective, social media serves as an effective venue to showcase program work and interact directly with stakeholders. This tip sheet will describe the steps for establishing a strong social media presence and provide guidance on how to strategically deploy social media to enhance relationships with stakeholders and partners.

BENEFITS OF ENGAGING VIA SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media has long since eclipsed its early image as a time-waster for tech-obsessed youth. It is now widely accepted as a key medium for a variety of organizations to interact with their stakeholders. About 70% of all Americans use the most popular platform, Facebook, with even higher usage among adults of prime parenting age (79% of 30-49-year-olds) (Perrin & Anderson, 2019). Because social media is now seen by users as a primary source for up-to-date information, social engagement is a powerful tool for building buy-in and engaging with stakeholders. A well-managed social media presence can provide a dynamic and positive picture of your SRAE program.

1 KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

The single most helpful step toward creating an effective social media presence is to gain a clear picture of your intended audience(s). This includes their characteristics, as well as their social media preferences. Audiences may include:

Parents and guardians

Schools or other service settings

Organizational partners and community stakeholders

Participants themselves

This knowledge will tell you where and when to effectively engage your audience, what kind of messages they'll respond to, and what form those messages should take. Use hard data – sourced from performance measures data, existing social media account metrics, and other market research—to inform your audience profile, to the extent possible.

2 CHOOSE YOUR PLATFORM

Rather than chasing trends, be strategic in choosing which social media platforms to use. For organizations with limited time and resources, it is not necessary—or advisable—to try to participate on all platforms. Each platform offers different advantages and reaches slightly different audiences.

Knowledge of how your target audience consumes social media will be critical to targeting the most effective channels. Considerations include:

Audience Preferences

Where does your target audience spend its time online?

Type of Content

What kind of content can you produce?

Frequency of Posting

How often can you reliably post?

3 MAINTAIN A CONSISTENT VOICE

Posting consistently is undervalued, but is vital to success. Maintaining consistency can be difficult for busy organizations, but when an account is not well-maintained, the result is a disjointed or neglected-looking online presence. Two steps are key to maintaining a robust presence:

1. **Designate a specific staff member to manage social media.** This does not necessarily require large amounts of time—a few hours per week is sufficient—but does require a social-savvy personality. A good social media specialist will be dynamic and outgoing, digitally adept, highly responsive to stakeholders, and grounded in organizational values. If there is no staff capacity, explore partnering with a university to create an internship opportunity.

2. **Create a plan and a schedule for posting.** This prevents large gaps between posts and also regulates the work of maintaining social media accounts. Spreading out posts over time builds a consistent online presence for your program. On platforms like Facebook, you can schedule items to auto-post at specific times in the future.

Part of a strong social media plan is establishing your program's "voice." Every organization has a unique voice, whether authoritative, warm, playful, or earnest. Because social media is based on personal, social connections, a genuine organizational voice will build authenticity. The designated social media specialist will be key to maintaining this voice.

4 CREATE VISUALLY APPEALING CONTENT

Social media posts perform better when they are visually engaging. This might mean different things on different platforms, but at a minimum, make sure each post has both text and an image or a link.

Images can come from many places, but original photos are best. Make it a habit among staff to take photos for social media use. These may include photos of staff or volunteers, partners, materials used in classroom activities, or participants (with the appropriate permissions). You want a large selection of photos as a resource pool for future posts.

Remember to leverage or repurpose existing content. Communications produced for your organization's other channels, like emails or annual reports, can often be used in bite-sized pieces for social media. You can also share content from similar programs (including fellow grantees) and online media sources.

Feel free to experiment! The easiest way to make posts more visual is to use in-app features like frames, text colors, emojis, stickers, effects, and filters. You can also make your own original memes, gifs, and other highly "shareable" content. Try free online tools, such as Canva, Pablo, Snappa, GIPHY, and Meme Generator.

5 DEEPEN ENGAGEMENT WITH SUPPORTERS

Social media works best when it is authentic and personal. Social networks can amplify and enhance your core messages in more dynamic ways than simple one-way promotion. With skillful social media engagement, your program's supporters can deepen their engagement and become effective ambassadors.

One resource-efficient technique is to create posts profiling your staff members, supporters, and participants (with the appropriate permissions). Testimonials from real people can build credibility, clarify the nature of the program, and create buy-in. Set up a simple interview template with 1-3 key questions about the person's involvement, and share their responses in a video or a photo caption. Where possible, tag

the featured individual or organization so that their followers can see the post.

Likewise, share the content of your organizational partners strategically, and, when communicating with them by phone or email, request that they share specific posts with their audience. Tag partners when a post would be of interest to them. Social media is built on mutual relationships!

Be assertive and explicit in asking followers to share or re-post key messages. This is most important for amplifying messages with a specific call to action, like "enroll now."

6 BROADEN YOUR PROGRAM'S REACH

Social media can be leveraged to expand your program's reach in the larger community. As the program becomes established in the community, a robust social media presence that illustrates positive interactions will build legitimacy.

There are several ways to craft posts that broaden your program's visibility. Most important is to create high-quality, shareable posts that are relevant to your audience. Focus on content that illustrates your program's mission in action. Other best practices include:

Using hashtags
to make posts more searchable.

Creating "evergreen" posts
that remain relevant for months or years without going out of date.

Focusing on inspiring,
positive content; it tends to be shared more widely than neutral or negative posts (Relph, 2018).

Testing informational posts
with a sample of the audience first, to ensure that the information is relevant.

Interacting often
with like-minded organizations and

partners' accounts, including amplifying their messages generously.

A healthy social media account will be highly responsive to viewers and commenters. Users increasingly expect prompt interaction when they engage via social media. A 2018 report showed that 83% of social media users expected to respond within a day, and 44% of Millennials expect a response within an hour (Cox, 2018). The social media specialist should be prepared to respond to comments and questions promptly when they're posted. The associated benefit of this responsiveness is that positive feedback can be spotlighted and amplified to demonstrate the program's genuine benefits.

Likewise, negative comments should be addressed promptly and professionally. Negative comments are almost inevitable in an online venue, and so the organization should be prepared to counterbalance these comments without being defensive. Pre-written guidelines prohibiting profanity, threats, abusive or defamatory comments, or off-topic comments will provide clarity in moderating the account. Prepare calm, positive, proportional responses to complaints, but don't engage repeatedly with unreasonable critics. If necessary, work with organizational leadership and/or legal counsel in drafting a response. Ultimately, the best defense against unwarranted negativity is the demonstrable positive work conducted by the program, and its existing support from stakeholders.

Lastly, conduct an account check-up regularly to ensure that your profile page makes a positive impression on visitors who might seek it out. Display clear, compelling information about the purpose of the program, and make sure basic organizational information, including contact information, is clearly visible in your social media profile.

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