



# State of Ohio Guidelines for the Use of Social Media

Last updated: January 19, 2010

## **Basic Social Media Guidelines**

### ***I. Overview of Social Media***

Just as the Internet and e-mail revolutionized business in the past 15 years, social media is changing the way that people access information and communicate with businesses and their government. Because effective communication with citizens, legislators, media, and other public and private sector partners is central to a successful and responsive state government, state agency communications directors are encouraged to consider agency participation in social media.

Social media networks provide opportunities for Ohio government to deliver highly-accessible content through a variety of new channels and platforms. Participation may augment current communication strategies to reach a broader audience, encourage greater citizen engagement and better connect Ohioans with state services.

The decision to engage in social media should be made after careful evaluation in the context of a comprehensive communications plan. This document is intended to provide basic information to assist state agency communications directors as they begin to develop social media communication plans.

Communications directors and communications departments are encouraged to develop agency-specific policies or guidelines on the use of social media. These guidelines will evolve as new technologies and social networking tools emerge. Current examples of social media platforms include, but are not limited to, Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter. While a specific tool or platform may not prove beneficial to an agency as a whole, keep in mind that it may be a perfect fit for a specific program or initiative.

### ***II. Participation Guidance***

Agencies should maintain an official "Ohio" presence on social media platforms. Social media platforms should include professional, official communications and branding that represent the State of Ohio, supplementing an agency's Web site, marketing materials, and press releases.



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Agency communications directors are ultimately responsible for all content management on social media platforms. Therefore, a deliberative decision-making process is recommended before content development and/or management responsibilities are assigned to other agency employees. The following are a set of generally-accepted standard practices for social media engagement:

- **Protect Sensitive or Personal Information.** The State of Ohio is entrusted with citizens' sensitive and personal information. When sharing content on social media platforms, do not share personal or confidential information. If there is any question as to whether or not information is sensitive or personal in nature, consult with agency senior management and legal counsel before sharing content.
- **Be Accurate.** Before posting content or responding to comments, ensure that the information or response is accurate. Accuracy is critical, because content on social media platforms is extremely visible and can be replicated in multiple locations within minutes.
- **Correct Mistakes.** If a mistake or inaccuracy is found, correct the mistake and communicate its subsequent correction clearly and quickly.
- **Be Considerate.** Ensure that all communication is professional, respectful, and factual. Remember that all content represents the State of Ohio.
- **Respect Copyrights & Trademarks.** When posting content do not infringe upon copyright or trademark protections.
- **Use State E-mail Addresses & Strong Passwords.** State e-mail addresses should be utilized to confirm to users that the content provided is official. Personal e-mail accounts (non-state, e.g. private yahoo or Gmail accounts) should not be utilized for official state agency communications through social media platforms. Accounts should use strong passwords (letters, numbers, and characters) to ensure optimal security and reduce possible security breaches.



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- **Avoid Advertisements, Sponsorships & Endorsements.** When possible, Ohio agencies should avoid advertisements, endorsements, or sponsorships on social media communication platforms. It is important that agencies understand that context-sensitive ads may appear on some platforms that do not reflect the views or positions of an agency or the State of Ohio. This should be considered as the agency evaluates whether to utilize a particular social media platform.
- **Misrepresentation.** If a user is authorized by the agency to participate in social media platforms that are not sponsored by the State of Ohio, ensure that the user is familiar with the misrepresentation requirement in [Ohio IT Policy ITP-E.8, "Use of Internet, E-mail and Other IT Resources."](#) Concealing or misrepresenting one's name or affiliation to mask unauthorized, fraudulent, irresponsible or offensive behavior in electronic communications is strictly prohibited.
- **Stay within Area of Expertise.** Consult with subject matter experts and obtain assistance preparing responses before posting content to maintain credibility and relevancy.

Please remember that [Ohio IT Policy ITP-E.8](#) applies to social media participation as well as any agency specific policies governing appropriate use. [Ohio IT Policy ITP-E.8](#) requires individuals participating in or contributing to online communities to be approved by the agency and specifies that they must fulfill agency education and awareness requirements prior to engaging in these communities.

In addition, the policy outlines what is considered "unacceptable use," such as violating – or supporting/encouraging the violation of – local, state or federal law. The policy also prohibits soliciting money or support for political causes. Prior to engaging in social media communication please make sure individuals have thoroughly reviewed [Ohio IT Policy ITP-E.8](#) and any applicable agency policies.

All content represents the State of Ohio. It must be factual, credible, professional, and useful to Ohio's citizens.

### ***III. Content and Engagement***

Social media is intended to be very accessible and interactive. In order for social media platforms to remain relevant, content needs to remain current. Participation in social media platforms will require a significant commitment to ensure effective and sustained engagement. It is also important that expectations regarding the extent of interactivity available to participants are clearly communicated through a given social media platform.

Agencies should establish a standardized content development and management process to release and retire content, as well as to monitor user comments if enabled. In order to mitigate the risk that inappropriate content may be posted, participation should be limited to those identified and assigned by agency communications directors.

Ohio agencies should work with their legal counsel and collective bargaining to ensure that bargaining unit contracts are not breached when content managers are assigned, and that the activity falls within allowable job duties.

Ohio agencies should determine what type of content is acceptable and what is not. This would apply to agency-provided content as well as user comments. An agency may want to consider disclosing that it reserves the right to delete or block the following types of content:

- Vulgar or offensive language
- Content (or a user) that promotes, fosters, or perpetuates discrimination on the basis of race, creed, color, age, religion, gender, marital status, status with regard to public assistance, national origin, physical or mental disability or sexual orientation
- Spam
- Content that advocates illegal activity
- Promotion of particular services, products
- Content that supports or opposes political campaigns or ballot measures
- Infringement upon copyrights or trademarks
- Information that may tend to compromise the safety or security of the public or public systems



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As part of their content management process, Ohio agencies must also address the appropriate transition of responsibilities when an individual is no longer serving as a content manager.

## **IV. Branding**

A key part of the content management strategy is having a consistent look and feel across all Ohio social media platforms. Implementing a standard branding strategy is a way for Ohio to establish an official, identifiable presence across a number of communication channels.

Agencies can contact the Governor's Office of Communications for a current copy of the Ohio branding guidelines.

## **V. Implied Endorsements**

A number of social media platforms sustain their existence by selling advertising space on their social media platforms. As a government entity, the preference is that Ohio content does not exist next to any advertisements.

Social media platforms such as Twitter do not currently have advertisements on their site. However, other mainstream platforms such as YouTube and Facebook do allow for advertisements. If an agency is planning to participate on a social media platform that contains advertisements, agencies should review the platform settings to disable advertisements when possible. This will help a state government agency or program avoid the appearance of preferential treatment or endorsement of a certain product that may or may not be beneficial to its citizens.

If an agency is unable to disable advertisements on a platform, this should be considered when making a decision whether or not to utilize this service. Agencies must be aware that platforms often use context sensitive advertisements that could trigger on key words and provide advertisements contrary to positions of the agency or the State of Ohio. If these platforms are utilized, disclaimers may be helpful on both the platform and the agency Web site.



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## **VI. *Personal Use of Social Media***

These guidelines focus on agency participation on social media platforms; however, like any other citizen, state employees have the right to participate in social media on their own personal time using their own personal IT resources. It is important that employees understand when creating content or posting comments, there should be no expectation of privacy. Social media is an extremely public forum and the lines between personal and professional opinions could easily become blurred; it is important to be cognizant of this fact. A good rule of thumb is to never post or create anything that would be potentially embarrassing or considered offensive. Remember that even if information is shared from personal accounts, it could be identified by the press and reported in association with an employee's professional role.

In addition, [Ohio IT Policy ITP-E.8](#) requires public servants to avoid the appearance of impropriety and avoid the appearance of leveraging the stature of the state in the use of their assigned state e-mail address. Official state government e-mail addresses, such as "firstname.lastname@ohio.gov" or "firstname.lastname@agency.state.oh.us," should not be used for personal communication in public forums.

## **VII. *Conclusion***

Agency communications directors are encouraged to examine the benefits associated with the use of social media platforms. Participation in new communication channels that reach vast and varied audiences will foster a more open, transparent and accessible Ohio government.

Agencies contemplating the launch of a social media initiative, as well as agencies already utilizing social media, should complete the "Plan for Ohio Agency Social Media Engagement" template. This will help agency communications directors think through social media engagement plans while also helping the state to establish a comprehensive social media presence.

Additional resources are also available, including documents on:

- The Decision to Participate in Social Media
- Privacy and Security



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- Public Records and Accessibility
- Research and Strategy
- Training and Transitioning