National Volunteer Workforce Solutions

Social Media Handbook

Part 1:

Introduction and Social Media Policies

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Introduction

This handbook is presented in a series of documents that will discuss how to use and manage social media. All or some parts of this series may apply to you and your department. Our goal is to offer guidance that will benefit your department when it comes to navigating social media.

The series will provide an in-depth look into how to use and manage some of the most popular social-media sites. It will also offer tips on how to improve the amount of followers you have and on how to find success in accomplishing your goals for these sites without consuming all of your time.

It's our sincere hope that you find this series helpful in your social-media endeavors. Should you require additional help beyond the guide, we recommend turning to individuals near you who are active on social media. This may include your children, grandchildren, a young recruit or any tech-savvy member. You can also always reach out to the International Association of Fire Chiefs for assistance.

What is Social Media?

Social media is a term used to describe websites and applications that allow users to create and share information, ideas, interests and other forms of content interactively with other users. What sites and applications are considered can be debated; for instance, some consider blogs a form of social media while others believe blogs lack the interactive quality necessary on a social media platform.

Common social media sites are Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, Instagram and Snapchat. These tools are different from your website, advertisements and traditional forms of media because they engage your audience in an interactive format.

Each social-media platform has some terms and actions specific to them. This vocabulary will be covered in later parts of our social-media handbook series that address the specific social media platform.

How does this relate to my department?

While you or your department may not currently be on social media, your community and members of your department are. Social media has changed the way society works and its members interact. The smallest of mistakes have gone viral across the world; this means your department must always operate as if a camera is watching it.

The attention your department generates through social media doesn't have to be negative. A simple video post from a recruitment event can let your entire community know you need more volunteers. Posting photos from a school event or a community-awareness event can help your department reach further into your community and raise awareness about your department and essential fire-safety topics.

If your department is considering creating a social-media account, keep in mind that social media takes time to develop, and it will take cultivation for your department to make it a useful tool. You should first evaluate if your department has a member or members willing to dedicate the time needed to build a community following and if the department will trust these members to post as the department. The actual amount of time required is minimal, but cultivating a

following requires a consistent commitment. This will be discussed further in the social-media management section of this series.

It's important to note that an overly cumbersome approval process can prevent the individual(s) in charge of the department's social media account from posting on the medium regularly or responding to inquiries. This behavior will prevent your department from having a successful social media account. Creating clear processes for posting as the department helps ensure that the individual(s) posting on your department's behalf have a clear understanding of what is acceptable content. This provides them the freedom to interact on social media within certain boundaries, allowing your department to see the most benefit from the different platforms.

Whether your department has its own social media presence, it's important to understand that many of your department and community members have a social media presence. This means you need to be aware of what could be posted about the department or as a reflection on the department and take the proper steps to protect the department to display its positive aspects.

Social Media Policies

Does my department need a social-media policy?

Yes, your department absolutely needs a social-media policy. Social media is a great opportunity for your department and members to engage with each other and the community. This can help your department build a positive brand and increase community awareness and engagement.

Social media also contains a tremendous risk of the potential for individuals to damage the department. It can create instant notoriety for a scene or the department in a matter of seconds; such a post could come from the department, a department member or the public.

It's important to realize that your department will never have complete control over the dissemination of information. Despite this fact, having a clearly defined social-media policy can help protect your department. This makes having a policy a necessity, whether your department uses social media or not.

There are many ways to create a policy. The most common is to have one general policy covering all aspects of social media. General policies tend to work well if a department itself doesn't have a social-media presence.

Another common approach is to have a separate policy for each platform. This allows the department to be more specific within their policy, allowing them to mitigate risks more appropriately. Each platform presents different types of risks and uses a different form of communication, meaning a general policy may only address the most troubling of conduct. The following is a list of individual policies you may want to consider implementing:

- Member Code of Conduct for Online Communications
- Member Code of Conduct for Department Representation in Online Communications
- Member Facebook Policy
- Member Blog Policy
- Member Social Network Policy
- Member Twitter Policy
- Member LinkedIn Policy
- Member Image/Video Policy
- Department Facebook Page Policy
- Department Twitter Account Policy
- Department YouTube Account Policy
- Department Password Policy

Getting Started

Creating a social media policy may seem like a daunting task, but it isn't something you have to do from scratch or on your own. You can use sample policies and modify them to meet your needs, and you can pull other members in to help you write the policy.

Selecting several of your members who are active social-media users to help create your policy can ensure that it's not overly restrictive or misses any key points. This in turn can help you

create a successful policy. Involving department members can also encourage more members to post on social media about the positive activities of the department.

The first step in creating a social media policy is to decide if your department will be doing one general, all-encompassing social-media policy or several policies that are more specific. If you are creating several policies, you should figure out what the topic for each policy will be. See the section above for a list of suggestions.

Next, we recommend brainstorming good and bad scenarios for social media. This brainstorming will help you picture what you want your policy to encourage and discourage. The good scenarios may even help you set up some goals for your department to achieve with its own social-media accounts. Once you've finished your lists, take a step back and see if there are any similarities.

Use the findings from your brainstorming to guide you in writing your policy. Below, we have included our list of recommendations of what to include in your policy.

The IAFC's Volunteer & Combination Officers Section (VCOS) offers a few sample policies to help you get started writing your policy:

- Social Media Usage Rules (Glendale Fire Dept) – PDF
- Social Media Usage Rules (Wilton Fire Dept) - PDF
- Social Media: Posting Photos – PDF

Once you have created a social-media policy, *consult an appropriate professional to ensure that it does not violate any state or federal laws.*

Why do we need a social-media policy?

Social media is about sharing and collaborating with a group of individuals, so it's important to create a policy that won't overly inhibit the collaborative nature of the medium. The policy should focus more on what members can do and best practices for social-media use rather than everything members can't or shouldn't do on social media.

It's also important to be as specific as possible in the policy while *not* making distinctions based on subject matter or viewpoint as these could possibly put you in violation of the First Amendment.

What should we include in our social-media policy?

When creating a social media policy, make sure you:

- Remind members to familiarize themselves with your other personnel agreements and policies included in the personnel handbook.
  - Make sure you specify that these policies apply to social media as well.
- State what the social media policy applies to.
  - For example, if you are making a general policy it might apply to multi-media, social networking websites, blogs and wikis for department, professional and personal use.
- State that internet postings should not disclose any information that is confidential or proprietary to the department or to any third party that has disclosed information to the department.

- Require any member commenting on any aspect of the department's business to clearly identify their role within the department or as a member of the department and include a disclaimer, such as "the views expressed are mine alone and do not necessarily reflect the views of (your department's name)."

- State that internet postings should not include department logos or trademarks unless permission is asked for and granted.
- State that internet postings that include videos and/or photos taken while on duty must be in compliance with the department's photo and video policy (This may be outlined in the social media policy or a stand-alone policy.)
- Emphasize that internet postings must respect copyright, privacy, fair use, financial disclosure, and other applicable laws.
- State that emergency scenes are never an appropriate place for posting on social media.
  - Make sure you reiterate appropriate scene behavior during and after an emergency. Even though a scene may be under control an innocent post or photo (even if the photo is not posted on a social media site) can be seen by the public and bystanders as being disrespectful to the victims involved in the incident.
- Clearly state that members should never post or use social media while caring for a patient.
- Include that the department reserves the right to request that certain subjects are avoided, members to withdraw certain posts, and remove inappropriate content.
- Clearly explain any required approval process for a member to post about or on behalf of the department and the industry on Department blogs, Facebook pages, Twitter accounts, etc, including exactly what does and what doesn't require approval.

The list above is not comprehensive and is meant as a guide to help your department create a thorough social-media policy.

Should you feel that a member has violated the policy, make sure you have an identifiable and well-articulated rationale for why using social media in that particular way is prohibited by the policy. The fact that a speech is annoying or offensive, without more, is not an acceptable rationale to prohibit it. On the other hand, if it interferes with a department's efficient operation the prohibition of it is more likely to withstand challenge.

Most importantly, always consult an attorney before disciplining or terminating a responder because of something they said or posted on social media. The application of law to employment/volunteer situations can be very complicated and this handbook is not offering any legal advice or guidance.

What do we need to keep in mind while crafting our social-media policy?

Social media policies moderate individuals' abilities to express themselves on media channels to ensure that what they say isn't inappropriate and doesn't include sensitive information. A fire department must ensure that its policy doesn't infringe on the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution or any other federal or state laws.

If your department is considered to be a government agency, you must ensure your social-media policy doesn't violate the First Amendment. Fire departments and EMS agencies run by cities, towns or municipalities as well as volunteer companies are government agencies for First-Amendment purposes, and their social media policies are considered a form of government regulation.

Departments that are considered to be government agencies must remain subject-matter and viewpoint neutral in all prohibitions to avoid violating an individual's First Amendment rights. For example, a fire department can't prohibit a member from using its name in a post, but it can prohibit a member from posting on social media while on scene. The first example violates an individual's First Amendment right by forbidding specific content; the second is acceptable because the prohibition is not content-specific but time-specific.

Once you have created a social media policy, *consult an appropriate professional to ensure that it does not violate any state or federal laws.*