

Best Practice Tips on Using Social Media¹

Introduction

Social Media can be used to improve or enhance professional networking and education, organizational promotion, consumer engagement, meeting and activity announcement, as well as community engagement. It provides an excellent communications tool for Planning Councils, one that Planning Council Support should use. When thinking about embarking upon the use of Social Media, be sure to consider both the benefits and the potential risks associated with this communication platform.

Here are some definitions and some social media best practice tips from Sandra Vincent, Project Officer (Planning Council Support Director) for the Atlanta Regional HIV Health Services Planning Council.

What is “Social Media”?

“The definition of social media is broad and constantly evolving. The term generally refers to Internet-based tools that allow individuals and communities to gather and communicate; to share information, ideas, personal messages, images, and other content; and, in some cases, to collaborate with other users in real time.”²

There are many Social Media networking platforms and sites with varying uses; to mention a few:

- Facebook
- Twitter
- Google Plus
- Instagram
- Snap Chat
- MySpace
- YouTube
- LinkedIn

The most commonly used for information distribution are Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Here is some basic information about them and how they can be used by your Planning Council:³

¹ Prepared for DMHAP through MSCG/Ryan White Technical Assistance Contract, March 2017.

² C. Lee Ventola, “Social Media and Health Care Professionals: Benefits, Risks, and Best Practices.” *Pharmacy and Therapeutics*, 2014 Jul; 39(7): 491-499, 520. See: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4103576/>.

³ See Karisa Egan, “The Difference Between Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Google+, YouTube, & Pinterest,” May 19, 2016. Available at: <https://www.impactbnd.com/blog/the-difference-between-facebook-twitter-linkedin-google-youtube-pinterest>.

Facebook has approximately 1.65 billion monthly active users, and is one of the most popular platforms. It is a place to engage, “share information and photos, updates, and general news with those who follow or ‘like’ you.” Fans of your Planning Council will come to your Facebook page to find out what’s going on.

Twitter is a “fast-paced, concise, and an easy way to connect with your audience. With over 310 million registered users,” Twitter is an excellent tool for getting out soundbites about your Planning Council.

YouTube is the “leading video-sharing platform in the world, and “Videos are a lot more engaging and shareable than text content.” Over one billion people use it every month.⁴ Videos uploaded to YouTube can be used to share meetings, provide training, webinars, talks, or share valuable information in a number of other creative ways. Remember your video must be crisp and easy to see.

Try using these three social media tools to communicate with your Planning Council’s community and stakeholders.

Eight Best Practices in Social Media

1. **Clearly articulate your reason for posting.**

Remember what you post becomes a part of your Planning Council’s brand. Don’t waste those precious engagement moments with information that is difficult to understand. Articulate clear, easy to read material, and tell the user why it is important.

2. **Know your audience.**

It’s important to know who is a part of your social media network. Knowing your audience will help you in fashioning the type of communications that will benefit your Planning Council. Watch what items are liked and what responses are given. Make sure that posts are culturally appropriate for all members of your audience.

3. **Monitor interactions.**

Ensure that interactions are positive. Respond to questions in a timely fashion. If you find that undesired information is being posted, restrict your audience’s ability to make posts. If you receive negative feedback, consider it as constructive criticism and an opportunity to improve. If someone is complaining, it’s more than likely they’re looking for a resolution from you. If you find negative, vulgar, or inappropriate posts, don’t hesitate to delete immediately.

4. **Include contact information and website address.**

Remember always to include contact information and ways to reach a live person. Stay away from using individual names and instead use the Council’s name or reference “Planning Council Support” or some other non-individualized descriptor.

⁴ Infographic, Mushroom Networks. See <https://www.mushroomnetworks.com/infographics/youtube---the-2nd-largest-search-engine-infographic>.

5. **Keep your post short and use pictures when appropriate.**

Remember your goal of using Social Media is to engage and inform. When posts are too long, interest can be lost. Focus on sharing information that highlights the work of your Planning Council. Whether you are sharing information on an event or person, be brief – and remember pictures get attention quicker than plain text.

6. **Use hashtags.**

Hashtags (#) are an important search tool, used most often with FaceBook and Twitter. Individuals searching for specific information will often check hashtags to find other related posts concerning the particular subject matter. Remember: hashtags allow you to read a wider audience and can potentially engage others as followers of your Social Media site.

7. **Maintain privacy and confidentiality.**

As Planning Council Support, always remember that confidentiality and privacy are important. Do not post anything that would compromise the integrity of an individual or reveal unintended health information. This is especially important when posting meeting pictures. Make sure before posting pictures that you have obtained written permission in the form of a photo release.

8. **Use social media as part of your larger communications effort.**

Social Media is a tool for community engagement but should not be used as your sole method for communication. Use other media as well, taking advantage of smartphone and other technology. In Atlanta, we inform members and our community partners about meetings through an online communication platform called One Call Now.⁵ The platform sends “voice, text and email messages to groups of any size through a simple click or call.” This is especially helpful in communicating with consumers who may or may not have the capability to receive email reminders.

⁵ One Call Now. See <http://www.onecallnow.com/>.