

How to avoid committing social media gaffes

11 strategies for keeping your staff out of hot water in today's new media world

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Social media give school leaders an opportunity to interact with parents and other constituents on a more informal and interactive basis, but they should take care to remain professional.

Once primarily the purview of high school and college students, social media use is growing exponentially across all demographic groups, including senior citizens.

With social media use becoming more mainstream, principals, teachers, parent volunteers, and other adults affiliated with public schools are frequently using social media for networking and communication purposes. But while social media give school leaders an opportunity to interact with parents and other constituents on a more informal and interactive basis, don't let the informal tone fool you.

A new superintendent who boasted online that he slept until 10 a.m. and surfed the internet on his first day under contract with his new employers recently became the subject of intense mainstream media scrutiny.

As this superintendent discovered, humor—however well intended—often backfires, especially online or in print when body language, facial expressions, vocal tone, and other cues are missing.

Even though the district offices were closed, employees, parents, school board members, and taxpayers generally don't appreciate hearing that their new leader thinks he's now on easy street. Most new superintendents face a tough enough job without shooting themselves in the foot before they even show up at the office.

Legitimate concerns regarding federal e-Rate dollars and Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA) regulations aside, avoiding social media isn't the answer.

According to the Pew Research Center, 86 percent of young adults ages 18 to 29 use social media networking sites.

Use has nearly doubled for older adults during the past year, with 42 percent of adults ages 50-plus now using social media network sites. Pew Research data also show that 20 percent of adults 50 to 64 years of age connect via these sites on a daily basis.

With social media use nearly universal, school districts need to develop guidelines to help employees navigate this new terrain successfully. Here are some tips to avoid committing major social media

gaffes:

- Develop guidelines for use and share with your staff. Update your acceptable-use policy as well as personnel policies to reflect the district's position on appropriate use of social networking sites. For ideas, check out the Social Media Guidelines for Schools wiki (<http://socialmediaguidelines.pbworks.com>). Many of the ideas presented here are adapted from this resource, which is meant to be shared and expanded as new information becomes available.
- Create an official site for your school or district. To protect others' privacy, set it up as a fan page so people can post comments or become a fan without giving you access to their personal pages. Commit staff time or resources to daily updates. Keep the tone conversational, but represent your organization and your position respectfully and responsibly. According to Pew Research, "44 percent of online adults have searched for information about someone whose services or advice they seek in a professional capacity."
- Keep your personal business private. Don't list your place of work, job title, or work eMail address on sites meant to be strictly personal. Use the privacy settings to restrict access to family and friends. Even so, recognize that privacy really doesn't exist on the web. Don't post any comments, pictures, blogs, presentations, or words that you don't want circulating more broadly.
- Recognize that as public employees, you always represent your school or district. The power of social networking is that these sites instantly connect you with colleagues and anyone associated with the institutions you list, whether as an alumnus or as an employee. If you don't want to see it on the front page of the daily newspaper, don't post it.
- Avoid participating in the cutesy, sometimes raunchy online surveys and other gimmicks that social media sites use to generate traffic. Again, employees have lost their jobs and suffered a great deal of embarrassment as a result of inappropriate and compromising photos or comments posted online that they mistakenly thought were private, and yet were easily forwarded, copied, or photographed by individuals to whom they'd granted access.
- Don't connect personally with students, ever. There's never an appropriate or legitimate reason to develop online relationships with students. Employee content should project a professional image and should not have a negative impact on the employee's ability to maintain the respect of students, parents, and peers.
- Recognize that the parents of your students are your partners in the educational process, not your "friends." It is simply too easy to cross lines that should not be crossed.
- Use group sites or pages to connect with students and parents for educational purposes, such as homework help or assignments. Group pages should not give access to teachers' personal and private information and accounts. Don't post student photos on group pages without parental permission, and don't post student photos on personal pages.
- Hold employees personally responsible for all content they post online. Digital content lives in perpetuity online. What seems funny and innocent at 22 might not seem so funny just a few years later. Classroom guidelines, along with state and federal laws regarding educational privacy, still apply in online settings.
- Avoid anonymous or misleading postings and comments. Don't misrepresent your identity and post a comment on someone else's site or blog without identifying yourself as a public school employee. If you're not willing to own your comments, don't post them. Just because social media sites offer anonymity doesn't mean you should use it.
- Teach employees how to use social media and networking sites wisely and well. Policies and procedures are important, but they only represent a first step. Provide training, and include information about how to use these sites in a professional manner in school and district newsletters and other communications.

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