# Using Social Media to Support Prevention Efforts: Ethical Considerations

As use of social media as a communications tool grows, so too has its adoption by the prevention field. Prevention practitioners currently use social media to connect and collaborate with colleagues, partners, and the people we serve; to design, deliver, and evaluate our prevention efforts, and to promote our messages and work. In doing so, it's important to apply the same code of ethics we apply to our face-to-face encounters.

This tool highlights some considerations for applying the Prevention Code of Ethics to our social media activities. We hope it will stimulate your thinking, as well as conversations with colleagues about these issues.

**Principle 1: Non-Discrimination.** To ensure that your social media efforts are consistent with this principle, consider the following:

- **Access.** One of the key tenets of the non-discrimination principle is to ensure that all members of your target population have comparable access to the services and resources you are providing. To this end, think carefully about the platforms you choose, as well as the size and complexity of the materials you post. For example, files that are two large may be difficult for people living in areas with limited bandwidth or slow Web connections to access. Social media use is not evenly distributed across all populations (e.g., less used in rural areas,[i] among seniors[ii]) and the Internet is not accessible to all, especially in remote areas. Learn about how the populations you are trying to reach use media (e.g., at Pew Research Center) and choose communication channels that will increase the likelihood of reaching your intended audience.

- **Accommodation.** Be sure to accommodate individuals with physical, sensory, and cognitive disabilities[iii] on your social media sites. For more guidance on how to provide appropriate accommodation, see this resource from the Government-wide Section 508 Accessibility Program: http://www.section508.gov/content/build/create-accessible-video-social.

- **Cultural Competence**. Interacting effectively with members of diverse population groups in ways that are respectful and responsive is essential in all communications, both on and off social media. There are many ways to demonstrate cultural competence in your communication efforts, including: providing content in the native language(s) of your target audience, being sensitive with your word choices, and using photography that reflects the diversity of your audience.

**Principle 2: Competence.** To ensure that your social media efforts are consistent with this principle, consider the following:

- **Education/Training.** As with any task you undertake in prevention, it's important that you start with a clear understanding of what's involved, and have the knowledge and skills needed to complete the task successfully.  Using social media is no exception. If you're not already a social media maven (and really—is anyone, given how rapidly the field evolves?), make sure you get the training you need to make the most of this approach and use it effectively. And what's great is that much of this information is available online!

- **Standards.** Even though social media tends to be considered a more "casual" medium, it's nonetheless important to ascribe the same standards to items posted online as to those developed and disseminated in print. To this end, ensure that all posts are well-researched, well-written, and grammatically correct. Also make sure that anyone with responsibility for posting social media content is well-supervised, and that your organization has a social media policy in place to guide its efforts. Finally, carefully review content by other individuals and organizations before you "like", share, or retweet it, to make sure it aligns with the standards and stances of your organization.

- **Evaluation.** Regularly assess whether your social media is being implemented as planned and meeting your goals. Is it updated regularly? Is it growing over time? Are you achieving your desired outcomes? Learn more about evaluating your social media efforts with this tool: <u>Evaluating Social Media Efforts: One Approach to Consider</u>.

**Principle 3: Integrity.** To ensure that your social media efforts are consistent with this principle, consider the following:

- **Accuracy.** Ensure that all content posted on your social media sites is true and accurate. If mistakes are discovered, make sure to correct them right away.

- **Fair Credit**. Check to see that sources for all material (e.g., text, photos, videos) posted on your social media sites are cited, that you obtain appropriate permissions for copyrighted material, and that none of the content is plagiarized. (You can, however, "share" material from other websites or social media sites to your organization's social media accounts, as this credits the source.)

- **Preparation.** Be ready to respond appropriately if someone discloses sensitive or personal information (e.g., history of binge drinking) on your social media sites. If you haven't already done so, include guidance in your organization's social media policy on handling these types of situations.

**Principle 4: Nature of Services.** To ensure that your social media efforts are consistent with this principle, consider the following:

- **Involvement.** Be sure to include members of your focus population in planning, implementing, and evaluating your social media content. This is not only respectful, but will also help to ensure that your efforts are well informed, and are sensitive to the cultural norms and sensitivities of those you are trying to reach. Giving your target audience a voice in your social media efforts also helps to develop the buy-in you will need to sustain your social media efforts over time.

- **Professional Boundaries.** Make certain to keep your personal social media accounts separate from your organization's accounts, and distinguish when you are posting as an individual and when you are doing so as a representative of your agency. Also, bear in mind that it's important to respect the same boundaries on social media as you would for in-person contact with the public and service recipients (e.g., avoid forming dual relationships through private messaging on social media). Prepare statements to use should such boundary issues arise.

- **Reporting Requirements.** Be sensitive to evidence of abuse, neglect, or bodily harm that may be revealed online (e.g., potentially suicidal comments posted by a young person) and report it to the proper authorities, such as the office of child protective services or local law enforcement agency. The same information meriting reporting face-to-face also needs to be reported when acquired online.

**Principle 5: Confidentiality.** To ensure that your social media efforts are consistent with this principle, consider the following:

- **Permission**. Be sure to get permission before posting any photos or videos of program participants to your sites. Also, state on the site that permission has been obtained for any such material. Keep necessary documentation of this, as required by your organization.

- **Security.** Recognize that communication on a social media site is never entirely secure, and that confidential information you send to colleagues or sent to you by program participants—even by private message on social media—may not remain confidential. Thus, think carefully about what you post, taking great caution with anything that might be considered confidential.

- **Legal Issues.** Make sure you have a legal contact ready to advise you on any issues that arise related to confidentiality laws and regulations. Also have a plan, developed in consult with your legal contact, for emergency situations in which confidential information disclosed on your social media sites might need to be released (e.g., if someone sends a private message about plans to hurt others).

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**Principle 6: Ethical Obligations for Community and Society.** To ensure that your social media efforts are consistent with this principle, consider the following:

- **Advocating.** Promoting prevention is one of the important tenets of this principle, and your organization's social media sites can help you do so. Your social media presence can be used for educating community members, the media, and elected officials to raise awareness of your priority problem, increase awareness of key issues, and mobilize support. Keep in mind, however, that any funding limitations or restrictions on your professional ability to advocate extends to your social media presence (see below).

- **Non-Lobbying.** Prevention practitioners should take great caution before engaging in any type of lobbying activities or advocacy that attempts to influence specific legislation as doing so could place your organization's tax-exempt status at risk. This applies as much online as it does in-person. It is important to note, however, that lobbying is distinct from educating the public or legislators on a specific issue—the latter is *not* considered lobbying.

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reach out to your Project Officer

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