

How Do Social Media Managers “Manage” Social Media? A Social Media Policy Assignment

Melissa Adams, North Carolina State University

As numerous public relations research studies have noted, social media communication by employees and other stakeholders often impacts public perceptions of their associated organizations, whether or not that communication is sanctioned by the enterprise or is a personal expression. Employees have been known to use social media to purposefully express anger or attempt to harm the reputation of organizations through “venting” or negative “flaming” messages meant to be seen by potential clients or hires, thus presenting new challenges for public relations (Jennings, Blount, & Weatherly, 2014; Krishna & Kim, 2014).

As the resident social media “expert,” commonly charged with monitoring and responding to such communication, as well as day-to-day management, public relations professionals are usually the primary resource for the development of social media policies (Lee, Sha, Dozier, & Sargent, 2015; Messner, 2014). Even though organizations may not have a policy in place when they become active on social media, they often realize the necessity of one after gaining some experience (Messner, 2014).

This assignment was developed to address the task of policy development with practical training that foregrounds professional ethical communication guidance, legal precedent, and collaboration with organizational stakeholders. Researching and crafting the policy also prepares students for the emergent public relations role of social media policy maker and manager (Neill & Moody, 2015).

Assignment Rationale

The social media policy assignment was designed to integrate knowledge gained from recent course material and discussion of ethical social media practice, a unit on the current legal environment (copyright, etc.), and a workshop on the basics of campaign planning. It challenges students to apply what they have learned to the development of a comprehensive policy addressing organizational needs and includes all the appropriate information (i.e., they must think it through just as they would in an agency or professional project). This unit begins with the question “How do social media managers really ‘manage’ social media?” Then, moving through the ethics and legal units as a class, this question continues to promote discussion of the challenges that digital public relations practitioners must take into account as resident technical experts, planners, and policy advisors managing social media and organization-public relationships (Lee, Sha, Dozier, & Sargent, 2015; Neill & Moody, 2015). Legal case precedent and issues of copyright, fair use, and freedom of speech as expressed on social media (e.g., the *Hispanics United* versus *National Labor Relations Board* case) are the focus of class discussion leading up to the social media policy assignment (Lipschultz, 2014; Myers, 2014).

In addition, this assignment requires students to identify and work with a client organization, learn about the organization's potential risks from inappropriate social media use, and then make analytical decisions to construct an ethical, comprehensive policy to address them. Finally, the completed social media policy provides students with a professional quality portfolio piece, and if the client chooses to adopt it, an impressive resume-builder.

Student Learning Goals

This assignment develops several communications practice competencies noted by public relations educators and practitioners as desired skills for young professionals. Through its blend of research and knowledge application, the social media policy assignment teaches students to think like a practitioner following best practices and the value of collaboratively developed policies (Freberg, Remund, & Keltner-Previs, 2013; Messner, 2014). Working through this assignment, students build practical research skills by conducting discovery interviews with organization practitioners or administrators, while simultaneously gaining experience working with a client, managing logistics and communication. The assignment also helps students develop analytic acumen through performing an audit of client social media assets in regard to organizational risk.

By conducting a working review of existing organizational social media and example documents, students learn and understand common objectives and components of social media policies. They are then challenged to apply their recently gained legal knowledge to the development of an ethical and compliant written social media policy document.

Finally, as advanced writing and presentation skills are core competencies for public relations practice, the social media policy assignment provides an opportunity to refine presentation skills and gain experience producing professional quality documents. For the last stage of the assignment, students are required to formally meet and present their final policies to their client organizations, who in turn complete a satisfaction form for assessment.

Connections to Public Relations Theory and Practice

This assignment comes from a course developed for seniors and advanced juniors enrolled in the public relations concentration. It connects to recent scholarship and research on the ethical practice of social media in public relations. As communications professionals, students will likely be required to either update existing social media policies or develop new ones for clients or employer organizations. To do this, these young professionals will need to work across the organizations to collaborate with other stakeholders in human resources, legal and marketing to develop, implement, promote, and police them across the enterprise as noted in recent research (Neill & Moody, 2015). Crucially, they must be able to craft policies that both recognize the free speech rights of employees and provide a comprehensive guidelines document addressing all areas of possible use (Lipschultz, 2014; Myers, 2014).

In preparation for the social media policy assignment, students read and discuss a textbook chapter on the legal issues of social media practice (Lipschultz, 2014) and review National Public Radio's Ethics Handbook (n.d.), which addresses the general ethical journalism practice concepts of fairness, transparency, and accuracy. They also review the Public Relations Society of America's Member Code of Ethics (n.d.),

which reinforces the journalistic principles covered by NPR's Ethics Handbook, yet extends them to the role of ethical digital public relations practice by addressing practitioner duties such as the preservation of accurate information flow and safeguarding privacy (PRSA, n.d.). In addition to professional ethical guidance, these resources offer a framework for the students to refer back to as they work through the assignment and interact with their clients about the specific needs of their organizations.

Assignment Introduction and Execution

To introduce the assignment, two examples of actual (anonymized) social media policies of varying scope and audience (university and small business or student organization) are presented. Students form small groups to work through examples of the policies, comparing the components and noting differences. They make a list of all the similarities and differences of each policy element as a group. Afterward, the class discusses the elements of each policy to determine their primary function and necessity. Then the social media policy assignment is introduced with an in-depth handout (a brief version of the handout is provided in the Appendix) and a walk-through of the numerous questions students should ask to determine the needs and goals of their client organization, including resources required for implementation and adoption.

Students are then charged with identifying a client organization to work with on this assignment—a nonprofit organization, student organization, or a small business they are affiliated with that needs such a policy. If needed, students receive help connecting with a potential client organization for the project.

From this point, students use the assignment instructions to work on their individual policy documents on their own time. After completion and grading, the policies are returned to the students for finalization for their clients, and they email them to the instructor for a final proofread before the documents are delivered. This final step allows a review of presentation points and the assessment form with the students.

Evidence of Learning Outcomes

Several of the client organizations have implemented their student's policy document following completion of this assignment. These included student organizations, two nonprofits, and two small businesses where students were employed or interning at the time. One small business, a massage studio and beauty spa, adopted the social media policy across its small chain of retail locations in the Southeastern US.

Additionally, students have noted in instructor feedback forms that this assignment was very useful as it gave them an opportunity to develop "real world" experience and a document they could use as both a portfolio piece and a professional writing sample.

References

- Freberg, K., Remund, D., & Keltner-Previs, K. (2013). Integrating evidence based practices into public relations education. *Public Relations Review*, 39(3), 235-237. doi: 10.1016/j.pubrev.2013.03.005
- Jennings, S. E., Blount, J. R., & Weatherly, M. G. (2014). Social media—A virtual Pandora's box: Prevalence, possible legal liabilities, and policies. *Business and Professional Communication Quarterly*, 77(1), 96-113. doi: 10.1177/2329490613517132

- Krishna, A., & Kim, S. (2015). Confessions of an angry employee: The dark side of de-identified “confessions” on Facebook. *Public Relations Review*, 41(3), 404-410. doi: 10.1016/j.pubrev.2015.03.001
- Lee, N., Sha, B. L., Dozier, D., & Sargent, P. (2015). The role of new public relations practitioners as social media experts. *Public Relations Review*, 41(3), 411-413. doi: 10.1016/j.pubrev.2015.05.002
- Lipschultz, J. H. (2014). *Social media communication: Concepts, practices, data, law and ethics*. New York, New York: Routledge.
- Messner, M. (2014). To tweet or not: Analysis of ethical guidelines for social media engagement of nonprofit organizations. In DiStaso, M. W., & Bortree, D. S. (Eds.), *Ethical practice of social media in public relations* (pp. 82-95). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Myers, C. (2014). The new water cooler: Implications for practitioners concerning the NLRB's stance on social media and workers' rights. *Public Relations Review*, 40(3), 547-555. doi: 10.1016/j.pubrev.2014.03.006
- National Public Radio (n.d.). *NPR Ethics Handbook*. Retrieved from <http://ethics.npr.org/>
- Neill, M. S., & Moody, M. (2015). Who is responsible for what? Examining strategic roles in social media management. *Public Relations Review*, 41(1), 109-118. doi: 10.1016/j.pubrev.2014.10.014
- Public Relations Society of America (n.d.). *PRSA Member Code of Ethics*. Retrieved from <http://apps.prsa.org/AboutPRSA/Ethics/CodeEnglish/index.html>

Appendix

Assignment Worksheet

For this assignment you will create a formal, professional social media policy for an organization of your choice. If you need help identifying an organization, I will help you connect with a local nonprofit or student organization.

So—how do you go about this? Just follow these steps.

Research the social media footprint and assets of the organization and create a list of all their platforms and note any apparent campaigns, strategies and tactics used.

Identify, contact and talk to the person in charge of social media and brand administration for the organization (who will likely be in a communications function). If this individual can't meet with you in person, you can connect with them via email or phone. Note that in smaller organizations, this contact might be someone in human resources or customer service.

Ask them if they have an existing social media policy, if so, does it fit their needs? If not, can you do one for them?

Then ask—what are the main concerns regarding social media for their organization? Also find out if there are any special regulations or legal issues you should be aware of when preparing your policy.

Ask yourself (and your client organization when applicable) the following questions as you think through this assignment.

What is the “big picture” purpose of this policy? How will the policy meet certain organizational needs and align with business objectives?

What types of social media activities need to be addressed in the policy document? What platforms? What types of content?

Are there any special considerations (based on your organization) that you should consider and address in the policy?

Who is the audience for this policy?

What are the specific risks your organization hopes to mitigate with this policy and where might they come from? Employees? Other stakeholders?

Who will be in charge of policy administration? Who will monitor and report infractions? What will happen to violators? Who should be contacted with questions about the policy?

What resources might readers need to comply with this policy? (Example: A link to an organizational brand standards guide.)

How will your organization implement this policy? Who needs to review and approve it before dissemination?

Sections to include in your policy document:

Policy Overview – provide a rationale for the policy. Explain in clear terms why it is needed, how it will be implemented, etc. Explain its goal in positive terms (to maintain xxx, to promote xxx, etc.), and be sure to include a list of applicable social media assets. Explicitly state what is covered by the policy (and what isn't).

Allowed Use – provide examples of approved use. This should include actual or example tweets/posts as well as brand elements. Use screenshots to illustrate as needed.

Disallowed Use – provide examples of what NOT to do! Use screenshots and descriptive language.

Legal – address any legal issues including copyright. (Example: the FERPA section in the university social media policy example.)

General Best Practices – create a short list based on the organization's current social media assets. Follow the examples provided as well as those posted online by reputable and ethical organizations (such as the examples shared in class).

Resources – this section is for links or directions to internal resources such as legal documents or other policies, and for reference links to external sources.

Contact Information – for the administrator of the policy, legal, etc. as you see fit. Provide full information including email and phone number.

Assignment Rubric – 100 pts possible.

1. Research - 20 pts
2. Planning/Organization - 25 pts
3. Content (each section is addressed completely) - 35 pts
4. Clarity (is it easy to follow?) - 10 pts
5. Professional Presentation - 10 pts