In January 2009, vice president of Ketchum Interactive James Andrews flew to Memphis, TN, to speak with a major client, FedEx, about social media. On the way to his presentation, Andrews logged on to Twitter and posted: “True confession but i'm in one of those towns where I scratch my head and say 'I would die if I had to live here!'”

The problem? One of Andrews's followers, a FedEx employee, shared the update with his colleagues, sparking a PR debacle that was witnessed across the globe.

Today's new media tools are incredibly powerful communication vehicles that allow organizations to connect and engage with many different audiences. With more than seven million users, Twitter is growing at an annual rate of 1,382 percent, Facebook boasts over 250 million active members, and aspiring writers have started more than 133 million blogs. While the wild popularity of these apps has opened up a world of opportunity for developing brands and building communities, the social and extremely public nature of these services also brings potential hazards. That's why organizations—including libraries—are developing policies on the use of social media for staff and users alike.

In fact, many school libraries are devising policies for students and outlining acceptable-use guidelines for blogs (tinyurl.com/syvgoj) and other social media (edubuzz.pbworks.com/socialmediapupil). Schools have a unique set of challenges when it comes to developing such policies as social Web sites are often restricted by the district or blocked altogether.

**Why have a social media policy?**
The benefits of establishing a social media presence are becoming increasingly apparent as companies such as Dell...
share their success stories (tinyurl.com/6gj3lu), but we’ve also heard tales of embarrassing Facebook mishaps, hothead Twitterers, and outspoken bloggers. In a time when the distinction between personal and professional realms is fading and seemingly everyone has a Facebook or Twitter profile, a social media policy is a useful way to set some ground rules for employees with regard to their online activities. It’s also a reminder that the content that they post isn’t private and may ultimately reflect on the organization.

A social media policy can help establish clear guidelines for staff members who are posting on behalf of the organization as well as employees with personal social media accounts. There are also standards being created for users, letting them know what’s acceptable to post to an organization’s blog and community pages.

Large corporations, such as IBM, the BBC, and the Wall Street Journal, are among the many companies creating employee guidelines for blogging and social computing. Libraries and organizations such as the Western Kentucky University Library, St. Petersburg (FL) College Library, and the Library and Information Technology Association have all developed staff blogging policies. And the Whitman Public Library, Kern County (CA) Library, and the Monterey (CA) Public Library have devised public comments and social networking policies.

Many school libraries have social networking Web sites blocked by administration whose official policy is not to engage in social media—but that doesn’t mean that employees aren’t Twittering and networking through individual accounts. So even those libraries might want to consider establishing some standards.

What should a policy include?
When thinking about devising an internal social media policy, you may want to address the different types of applications such as blogs, Facebook, and other social networks, and microblogging services like Twitter, as well as accommodate those emerging technologies. Look to established policies for best practices and suggestions (see the list of resources and sample policies in the online version of this article). You may also want to consider composing the policy document in the form of a wiki (that’s what IBM did), which allows you to update your policy as new technologies develop. Here are some specific points you might consider including in your social media policy:
If you're wrong about something, admit it and move on. In the long run it's better to be honest about it and apologize than to deny it or cover it up.

Use a disclaimer. Include a disclaimer on your personal blog and other social sites in which you state that your opinions are yours alone and not your employer's. An example: “The opinions expressed on this Web site are my own and do not necessarily represent those of [insert organizational name].”

Don't share secrets. Be careful not to disclose sensitive or proprietary information, including financial details or any other internal matter. Disclosing private information about specific patrons, coworkers, or any other person affiliated with the library is also a violation.

Be yourself. If you're posting about matters related to your employer, be candid about who you are and who you work for. Although some bloggers post anonymously, it's recommended that you use your real name on social media sites and are upfront about your professional role.

Respect copyright. Understanding copyright and fair use laws with regard to republishing protected content and referencing sources is your responsibility. It's customary in the blogosphere to cite sources by linking to them within blog posts, and it's recommended that you do so.

Respect your colleagues. Consider the privacy of your coworkers and avoid posting photos, videos, or internal conversations without their permission.

Avoid online fights. If you have a difference of opinion with someone online or wish to post about a controversial matter, please take care to do so in a professional manner. Voice your opinion, but don't use social media for personal attacks or inflammatory arguments, and remember that what you post is not private and may impact the organization.

Post accurate information. You are responsible for checking the accuracy of the information you post online. Be diligent in your research to ensure that your posts are factually correct and, if possible, provide supporting sources.

Consult the employee manual. Be aware that all existing policies and employee behavior guidelines extend to the online arena as well as the workplace.

Use good judgment. Think about the type of image that you want to convey on behalf of the organization when you're posting to social networks and social media sites. Remember that what you post will be viewed and archived permanently online once you hit the “publish” button. On sites where you publicize your professional affiliation, make sure that your profile adheres to established criteria, especially if you're a new hire.

Provide value. Think about what you have to offer the community, whether it's thoughtful, relevant blog posts, newsy tweets, or homework help, and focus on providing that consistently. Look for opportunities on these social sites to offer recommendations or services to engage patrons and provide value to your community.

Accept responsibility. If you're wrong about something, admit it and move on. It's not the end of the world to have made a mistake, and in the long run it's better to be honest about it and apologize than to deny it or cover it up.

Libraries also create policies to guide users in the proper use of the institutions' Web pages. These guidelines include informing users that their comments and other posts will be reviewed before they are made public, and that by posting to the site, the user agrees to indemnify the library against all liabilities that may arise from user-created content. Some libraries reserve the right to edit or modify comments as well as reproduce those comments and messages in other public venues. The Whitman Public Library's Social Networking Policy (tinyurl.com/nyeq964) is an excellent example of this type of document.

In addition to establishing a social media policy, you may wish to sponsor employee training or orientation sessions regarding the use of the social Web. These sessions would educate new users about privacy issues and the types of things they should and shouldn't be posting online. Libraries may also want to institute new workflow processes alongside their policies, such as placing one person in charge of tweeting for the library, or designating a blog editor responsible for moderating comments and managing posts.

A social media policy doesn't have to be long or read like a tyrannical list of rules. But a few guidelines can go a long way toward helping people use social media wisely.

Ellyssa Kroski (ellyssakroski@yahoo.com) is an information consultant, reference librarian, writer, and conference speaker, as well as an adjunct faculty member at Long Island University, Pratt Institute, NY, and San Jose (CA) State University. She blogs at Librarian (oedb.org/blogslibrarian).

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