

Guidelines for Social Communications

Using our province guidelines for safe environment along with the guidelines on social networking put forth by the United States conference of Catholic Bishops, the following set of guidelines should be in place in our work for the young.

- a. **Define appropriate boundaries for communications.** These should be in sync with diocesan codes of conduct for other areas, such as the diocese's standards for protection of children and young people, Internet acceptable use policies, etc. Define what is considered confidential information, verifiable consent, personal identifiable information, contact with a minor, etc.

Topics that are in current debate will generate more comments/ responses. These include issues in which the Church's teachings are often in contrast to some popular positions (gay rights, abortion, immigration reform, health care reform). In other words, the Church's social justice teachings, including the pro-life aspects of those teachings, often elicit unfavorable comments. Some people determine that those topics will not be engaged with on official sites. Others provide guidance on how to engage in dialogue around these topics. (See "Rules of the Road" below for examples.)

- b. **Include examples of Codes of Conduct** that should be posted on social networking sites. Codes of Conduct are for visitors to the site. These codes should always be brief and immediately apparent to visitors. Visitors should also be made aware of the consequences of violations of the Code of Conduct.

The Code of Conduct on the USCCB's Facebook site is as follows: "All posts and comments should be marked by Christian charity and respect for the truth. They should be on topic and presume the good will of other posters. Discussion should take place primarily from a faith perspective. No ads please."

Always block anyone who does not abide by the Code of Conduct.

- c. Define instructions. Include instructions on how to report, block, etc., on the more popular social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter. This provides guidance for those church personnel who may be entering into social media for the first time.
- d. **Provide recommendations on how to deal with difficult "fans."** Give church personnel permission to trust their instincts on blocking repeat offenders of a site's Code of Conduct. Argumentative participants can easily change the tone of every post. A good way to determine if they should be blocked is to go to their profiles and browse through the pages that they have "fanned." Do not allow those unwilling to dialogue to hold your site and its other members hostage.
- e. **Provide trusted sites for reference, and recommend that site administrators have a thorough knowledge of these sites.** Often a link to the parish, diocesan, USCCB, or Vatican site can provide necessary information, thereby helping redirect the tone and substance of an online conversation.

- f. **Remind site administrators they are posting for a broad audience.** Social media are global platforms. Online content is visible to anyone in the world who comes to their sites.

Establishing a Site

- a. Websites or social networking profile pages are the centerpiece of any social media activity. The following are recommended guidelines for the establishment of a site. These can apply to a profile or fan page on a social networking site such as Facebook, a blog, a Twitter account, etc.
- b. Site administrators should be adults.
- c. There should be at least two site administrators (preferably more) for each site, to allow rapid response and continuous monitoring of the site.
- d. Do not use personal sites for diocesan or parish programs. Create separate sites for these.
- e. Passwords and names of sites should be registered in a central location, and more than one adult should have access to this information.
- f. Be sure those establishing a site know these key "Rules of the Road":
 - i. Abide by diocesan/parish guidelines.
 - ii. Know that even personal communication by church personnel reflects the Church. Practice what you preach.
 - iii. Write in first person. Do not claim to represent the official position of the organization or the teachings of the Church, unless authorized to do so.
 - iv. Identify yourself. Do not use pseudonyms or the name of the parish, program, etc., as your identity, unless authorized to do so.
 - v. Abide by copyright, fair use, and IRS financial disclosure regulations.
 - vi. Do not divulge confidential information about others. Nothing posted on the Internet is private.
 - vii. Don't cite others, post photos or videos of them, link to their material, etc., without their approval
 - viii. Practice Christian charity.

Social Networking with Minors

- a. Be sure to have permission from a minor's parent or guardian before contacting the minor via social media or before posting pictures, video, and other information that may identify that minor.
- b. Parents must have access to everything provided to their children. For example, parents should be made aware of how social media are being used, be told how to access the sites, and be given the opportunity to be copied on all material sent to their children via social networking (including text messages). While parents should be provided with the same material as their children, it does not have to be via the same technology (that is, if children receive a reminder via Twitter, parents can receive it in a printed form or by an e-mail list.)
- c. Church personnel should be encouraged to save copies of conversations whenever possible, especially those that concern the personal sharing of a teen or young adult. (This may be especially important with text messaging.)
- d. Make everyone aware of the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act, which is federal legislation that oversees how websites interact with children under age 13.

Personal Sites

- a. Personal sites of church personnel should also reflect Catholic values. Businesses are cautioning their employees that, while employees have a right to privacy and confidentiality regarding what their employers know about them, an employee's use of social networking-because of its very nature-means he or she relinquishes some privacy and could be construed as representing the company's ethics and values. Likewise, church personnel should be encouraged to understand that they are witnessing to the faith through all of their social networking, whether "public" or "private."
- b. Many employers and church organizations ask their personnel to consider including a disclaimer on their personal sites, especially if employees/church personnel are highly visible in the community and/or post material related to church work/ministry on their personal sites. One example: "The views expressed on this site are mine alone and do not necessarily reflect the views of my employer."

How to Report and Monitor

- a. Ask church personnel to report unofficial sites that carry the diocesan or parish logo to the diocesan communication office or pastor. It is important that the owner (the diocese or the parish) is able to protect its brand and identity.
- b. Inform church personnel whom to contact on the diocesan level (most likely the communication office) if they find misinformation on a site. This is especially important when responding to an incorrect wiki, such as Wikipedia, Masstimes.org, etc.
- c. Having a clear policy on whether diocesan personnel should be expected to respond to defamatory, libelous, or slanderous comments-not original postings, but comments-on a site, such as a blog. Some policies indicate that the diocesan communication office will

provide a response to a major news outlet's blog or a popular blogger, but not to every comment on those blogs or to other bloggers.

Consider posting these and similar policies and notices on your organization's social networks.

(Guidelines are taken and adapted from the Social Media Guidelines of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops).