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USA.gov & GobiernoUSA.gov Social Media Guidelines – Making Content Sociable

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Introduction

Social media is essential to accomplishing USA.gov and GobiernoUSA.gov's goal of making government information easy for people to find, access, and use. In 2010, new media channels accounted for 10% of all OSCIT touchpoints, and we predict that social media will be even more important in coming years. This document is written to help us use social media to help more people, make a greater impact, and build stronger USA.gov and GobiernoUSA.gov brands.

This document is not a set of rules, but a guide to help you understand the principles we use to help people through social media. We hope these guidelines will help you feel comfortable contributing content and ideas for any of our social media channels.

If you have any questions or comments about this document, please contact Michelle Chronister at michelle.chronister@gsa.gov.

Assumptions

These guidelines make the following assumptions about you, as a representative of USA.gov or GobiernoUSA.gov:

- You want to improve people's lives by making government information easy to find, access, and use.
- You can write in plain language.
- You are familiar with our social media channels (currently Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr) and understand the basic differences between them.
- You know you can always talk to your supervisor or Michelle (michelle.chronister@gsa.gov) if you have any questions about our social media programs.

Guiding Principle

USA.gov and GobiernoUSA.gov help people find, understand, and benefit from government information. Everything we do is motivated by this principle.

When we say "people," we mean anyone who is looking to "the government" for guidance, news, emergency information, and help accomplishing government tasks—we cannot assume they know which agency, program, or level of government can help them. It's our job to help them find their way.

A note on GobiernoUSA.gov: with a few exceptions, the needs of the USA.gov and GobiernoUSA.gov audiences are the same, and we should maintain a unified strategy when addressing both audiences. Unless indicated otherwise, "USA.gov" in this document refers to both USA.gov and GobiernoUSA.gov.

Content

Content is what we talk about. It refers to the topics of our messages, the words we write in our messages, and the links we recommend to our audience.

Our content should be:

- Useful, relevant, and/or interesting
- Easy to understand
- Unbiased
- Portable
- Lightweight

Useful, relevant, interesting

Respect our audience's valuable time and attention and seek to share content that is some variation of useful, relevant, and interesting.

When sharing content, ask yourself: Is this something that...

- someone can apply to improve their lives right now?
- will help someone make a better decision?
- you would share with your own friends and family?
- is relevant to a wide audience?

Another good way to tell if you're sharing good content is if you're learning things and having fun! We have a responsibility to share serious content like hurricane preparedness tips—this isn't always fun, but if your content research is boring you or making you sad, it will probably have the same effect on our audience. Try to mix things up.

Easy to understand

The content we share is only helpful if people can understand it. Look for sources that communicate information directly, clearly, and rapidly. Avoid sharing press releases and content written in “governmentese.”

Focusing on clear content does not limit us to sharing dumbed down content. We have found that our audience likes clearly-written content about complicated topics such as scientific research and health issues.

When sharing through GobiernoUSA.gov, write messages and share content written in international Spanish. Avoid words that are only understood by people from certain Spanish-speaking countries.

Unbiased

Some government policies and programs are controversial, but USA.gov needs to be as unbiased as possible. Check with someone else if you think the content you’re sharing might be biased or too controversial—particularly content about politically sensitive topics.

Portable

Write messages that make sense in any context—this makes our content portable, shareable, and helpful to anyone no matter where they encounter it.

Lightweight

Be mindful of people using mobile devices or with slow Internet connections. In general, link only to HTML-based pages. Avoid sharing flash-heavy sites and linking directly to PDFs, audio, or video files.

For instance, you can link to a video page on YouTube, because the page is based on HTML and users have the option to play the video or not. On the other hand, linking directly to a large video file creates a poor user experience.

If you have to link directly to something other than HTML, warn users by putting the file format in parentheses after the link. For example: “Tips on starting your own business <http://go.usa.gov/123> (PDF).”

A note on “official” content: We need to preserve our brand’s reputation as a source of official government information. Everything we post should be based on official government information. As needed, it’s ok to occasionally share links to unofficial content as long as it is clearly based on official government information and meets the above guidelines. Check with someone when sharing unofficial content.

Voice

If content refers to what we say, then voice refers to how we say it. Our voice should communicate our desire to help people and is defined by our word choice, tone, punctuation and anything else that influences the personality and style of our messages. Our voice should be the same regardless of language used (English or Spanish).

Our voice is	Our voice is not
Clear	Dumbed down
Confident	Formal or stuffy
Friendly	Chummy or clever
Purposeful	Curt

Clear

If nothing else, our voice must be clear. Write in plain language and use proper grammar and spelling. It's not the end of the world if our grammar isn't perfect (in case we need to condense things for Twitter), but we're not doing our job if people can't understand us.

Two things to note:

- Do not assume that our audience is familiar with any government acronyms other than FBI, CIA, IRS, or NASA.
- Avoid social media syntax and jargon. Our social media audience isn't all social media experts, and hashtags can be confusing to people.

Confident

Remember, we represent the official web portal of the U.S. government. As long as we choose our content carefully, we can write confidently, knowing that we're providing reliable information.

If we're talking about something important like an emergency, we should sound serious and be direct.

Being official doesn't mean we have to sound formal or use fancy words (in fact, we shouldn't), but we should avoid slang and we should never sound sarcastic. Our audience expects to be treated courteously and with respect.

Friendly

Our voice should communicate that we're a group of nice people who want to help (because it's true!).

A few tips to sound friendly and approachable:

- Write like a human. If your writing sounds robotic, try to fix it.
- It's ok to use exclamation points! But not all the time! And never use more than one exclamation point at once!!
- Speak to people, and not about them. Refer to our audience as "you," not "Americans," "citizens," "constituents," or "consumers."
- Refer to our team as "We" whenever it makes sense.

Purposeful

Remember, again, we represent the official web portal of the U.S. government.

Our brand benefits when we use social media to do good work. Social media is fun, and we should have fun using it, but our mission to help people should always be evident. We do not want people to visit one of our social media outlets and perceive that we're wasting tax dollars by being silly.

Engagement

If you are an admin of any of our social media accounts, you can use social media to talk with our audience, answer questions, and explain things.

When engaging people on social media:

- Be direct
- Be honest
- Be real

Be direct

Most of the time, answers to people's questions are easy—we can help them right away by writing a simple comment or by sending them a link. Apply our content guidelines when finding sources for answers.

If a question is unclear, answer the question as you understand it and invite the person to follow up if they need more help.

Be honest

Sometimes we can't find answers to people's questions. In these moments, remember: we can't always help, but we can always communicate that we want to.

If we cannot answer the question (such as personal questions or very complicated questions), ask the person to contact the appropriate agency or the National Contact Center. It's ok to apologize if we can't answer them straightaway.

Be real

Provide real answers that really help. When answering a question, ask yourself if you would find your answer helpful or satisfying.

Some people use social media outlets to post rants or harass other users. Do not engage them.

Conclusion

Have fun, be human, have a sense of humor. It's okay to make a mistake or not know the answer. As long as you focus on helping people, you're doing it right.

Don't hesitate to ask for help.