HHS Guidance on When and How to Engage over New Media Platforms

May 3, 2010

Background

The sharing of information and ideas among citizens has typically existed separate from their government. And while it may still be the primary role of federal entities to push out information to individuals and groups who can then converse among themselves, new technologies now allow for these federal entities to engage with stakeholders and the general citizenry so as to more easily exist within those social spheres.

The purpose of this document is to guide HHS entities engaging individuals online through the use new media tools. These new media tools include but are not limited to Facebook, Twitter, blogs, MySpace, Flickr, LinkedIn, and YouTube. Just as over other channels of communication such as emails, letters, and the telephone, engagement online necessitates responding to certain inquiries and concerns raised directly to your office.

What this document does not do

This document does not address use of personal accounts HHS employees may have on third-party platforms.

HHS Operational Divisions (OpDivs) may create guidance and/or policies that is more restricting than those found in this document. However, this document is written to reflect the current philosophy of GSA, the White House, and other federal entities.

Strategic Use

There are many questions to consider before deciding to engage the public. You should start by identifying your target audience through the lens of your mission statement and listening to what they are already talking about. There are a number of (free and paid) tools available that can help you gain insight into these online conversations. See our document entitled Social Media Considerations: Questions to ask before jumping in (PDF)[1] for help walking further through the strategic use process.

Credibility and Trust

Everything we do as a Department balances on public trust. Trust is gained from the efficacy of our efforts and the credibility of our communicating those efforts. While new tools allow information to be quickly disseminated from any computer, the accuracy of that information is the first determinant factor in communicating any message.

---

[1] URL: http://www.newmedia.hhs.gov/hhsCNM_before_jumping_in_03-12-2010.pdf

NewMedia.hhs.gov

The flow of information allowed by many tools for can be overwhelming. All efforts should be made to be fair and reasonable in terms of who and which individuals and issues receive responses. Expectations should be set so as to ensure fairness.

When to respond

There are a number of questions you should ask yourself before deciding whether it is appropriate to respond:

1. Would your responding stay within the mission of your office and the Department?

2. Is it a question meant to be divisive and controversial?

3. Would responding create an unsustainable expectation for responding to other inquiries?

4. Is there someone else better apt to address their question/comment, such as another HHS office, Federal entity, or the individual's local government?

5. Would responding open up a larger conversation of which you don't have the resources to maintain?

6. Is the question coming from a reporter or prominent blogger?

7. What are the implications of responding? How likely is your responding to garner media attention?

Ways to respond

After determining that a response is warranted, there are a few channels through which you can give your response. Regardless of the option chosen below, the platform on which the comment/question being addressed was sent should be consistent. That is, if it's a Facebook comment that you're responding to, your response should at least be communicated out over Facebook.

1. *In the same way they reached out to you.* For example, if the question was posted on your Facebook page, you may want to simply post your response as a comment to the question. (Be aware that this may set an unsustainable expectation with your users.)

2. *In your next post.* Instead of directly responding to a single individual, you can give the information to everyone. This indirect communication can help avoid setting expectations of directly responding to all individuals.

3. *On your web site.* Often a question requires a more extended response than is allowable on certain platforms. Further many tools have character count limitations that restrict the length of your message. Feel free to utilize your more primary web communication platforms (such as your web site or possibly your blog), and then on the original platform direct to this web page or blog post the individual(s) who initially had prompted the response.

Other considerations of engagement

1. All efforts should be made to be responsive to your audience. Your audience will soon learn if you have turned a deaf ear and are only interested in one-way communication.

2. Generic out-of-the-box responses have their purposes but often miss the point of direct engagement inherent in these tools.

3. Use language appropriate to your target audience.

4. Be wary of baiting questions meant to bring you into unwanted conversation. Most often a specific question is part of a larger more contentious issue.

5. Give time for others in the social sphere to respond to the comment/question raised. Don't monopolize conversation on a platform.

6. Under no circumstances should PIIs be solicited across any platform. Answering a question adequately may require additional information from the individual that constitutes personally identifiable information (PII). Direct these situations to the appropriate communication channel (email, hot-line, their doctor, etc).

7. Feel free to tell someone "Thanks!" or "Good question." or other phrases as appropriate with a platform's culture. Engagement is more than just responding to comments/questions directed at you.

Approval of your Content

All content posted should be approved. It's up to each office to establish a process for clearing content.

1. *Repurposing cleared information.* Individuals maintaining accounts can repurpose already cleared information directly from a web site or press release if this information sufficiently addresses the concern/question. You may want to provide a link to the web page from which this information was pulled. This also builds the credibility of each of your statements.

2. *Implied clearance.* An office may establish process that leaves some level of communicating up to the individual(s) maintaining the account. Much of the engagement messages - such as posting "Thanks!", "Good Questions.", and retweets over Twitter - may fall under this category. Guidelines that include desired tone and personality of the account, should be established and understood between the individual maintaining the account and their supervisors.

3. *Office/Agency clearance.* Individuals maintaining accounts should use their best judgment as to when an issue should be escalated beyond implied clearance. These types of situations are depicted usually by either the high visibility or their sensitivity of the topic at hand.

4. *Departmental clearance.* Offices/Agencies should use their best judgment as to when an issue should be escalated beyond their internal clearance protocol. These

types of situations are depicted by both the high visibility and sensitivity of the topic at hand.

Related Resources

- [HHS Blog Guidance](#)[2]
- [EPA: Should I respond on EPA's behalf? (Flow Chart)](#)[3]
- [Air Force: Social Media and the Air Force (PDF)](#)[4]

- More helpful resources at [NewMedia.hhs.gov/resources](#)

---

[2] URL: http://newmedia.hhs.gov/standards/blog/index.html
[3] URL: http://govsocmed.pbworks.com/f/should_i_respond_online.pdf
[4] URL: http://www.af.mil/shared/media/document/AFD-090406-036.pdf