

## Facing Facebook

*Social media's ubiquity makes it an essential tool for communications, but school boards must create clear guidelines or be faced with potential legal headaches*

**W**ith social media networking growing exponentially, it's no longer a matter of if, but when, school officials need to add this tool to their communications arsenal.

As American adults use social media sites to connect with family and friends, they are publishing blogs, uploading videos and photos, posting presentations, looking for jobs, and promoting themselves, their causes, and their businesses.

During 2010, Facebook was second only to Google and Yahoo in terms of directing and delivering online traffic, according to Compete Inc., a media company. YouTube and Wikipedia rounded out the top five.

Even senior citizens are joining the social media craze. According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project, social networking use among adult Internet users ages 65 and older grew 100 percent during the past year. It's little wonder more parents now expect to find their local schools and districts on the major social media sites as well.

### Going high-tech

Developing a social media strategy means more than simply having the communications team create a Facebook profile, upload videos to YouTube, or put out a few tweets. At its

core, effective communications is about getting the right message, experience, or interaction to the right people at the right time. At its best, communications is about behavioral change, not simply producing more tactics and tools that someone has to manage.

As part of a district's relationship-building strategy, social media networks have some advantages over other, more traditional methods. Inexpensive and easy to use, social media sites can help facilitate two-way communication.

That's why social media is a great way to start or bolster an existing key communicator program, especially one focused on external publics like parents, volunteers, Realtors, business leaders, or elected officials. The idea behind the program is to build relationships with a group of individuals who have influence in the community, and then support the relationship with steady streams of communication.

Alabama's Montgomery Public Schools (MPS), for example, has a Superintendent's Community Action Council that includes more than 800 opinion leaders. Most have been personally invited via a formal letter from the superintendent, but others have signed up through the website, on

forms left at schools, or via community meetings.

The latter group is divided in the communications office database into various publics—like-minded individuals with similar interests, concerns, or affiliations—so information can be targeted to meet their needs.

"Everybody has someone they trust and listen to, usually with a similar world view, and everybody has a best way to reach him or her," says Tom Salter, MPS senior communications officer.

Identifying those preferences and responding accordingly makes it more likely that district news and information will be opened, read, and acted upon. "In the absence of information, people fill the void with their own ideas and thoughts," says Salter. "I believe a key communicator program is the best way to fill the void."

Contact manager programs that come with many word-processing and calendar software packages can help administrators track communications and responses, while monitoring social media chatter can help officials identify simmering issues before they boil over into full-blown controversies.

The size of the network required to get the job done typically depends on two factors: school or district enrollment and staff time available to manage it effectively.

"People ask me all the time how many people they should have in their key communicator network," says Salter. "The answer is, 'It depends.' 'Enough' may be defined by how many can I handle or serve well."

Salter recommends identifying what he calls "skeletons"—mayors, top busi-

ness leaders, county commission chairpersons, and others who can open doors and respond quickly, especially if there's a crisis or urgent need. He has about 50 that he can call "if I really need to get something out pretty quick."

Once relationships are established, e-mails, electronic newsletters, e-vites, and social media updates can keep key communicators informed and connected to the district and to each other.

Engaged and informed key communicators, in turn, are more likely to tell the people they connect with on a regular basis about what is really happening in their public schools, fueling positive word-of-mouth and viral online chatter.

"The goal is to get folks involved, including building-level public relations teams, and have more eyes and ears out there that will keep the district office informed," says Salter. "Electronic communications needs to feel as if school officials are sitting next to the people they're talking to."

### Policy considerations

Social media sites offer plenty of firepower for more proactive communications, but they also can pose significant legal headaches and public relations challenges. You need to anticipate possible concerns and develop policies in advance that spell out expectations and consequences while passing legal muster.

Typically, school administrators spend more time worrying about what students might do, and forget about possible employee-related issues. Rather than shut down student and employee access to social media networks and other new Information Age tools, focus instead on teaching people how to use them in a productive manner.

Like students, employees maintain First Amendment rights when they walk into school or when they return home and go online. Recently, the

National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) argued a case in support of an employee who had criticized her bosses, often crudely. The employee was fired for violating the company's policies, which reportedly prohibit employees from even mentioning their place of work online.

Such a prohibition is unconstitutional, the NLRB argued, saying employees have the right to discuss work-related matters—including conditions, wages, human resource policies, and other issues—online or "at the water cooler."

On the other hand, courts have ruled

that school districts can discipline employees for online activities that disrupt operations, violate school personnel law, or criminal statutes. However, covering all possible technologies in one acceptable use policy remains problematic.

Many districts have inserted language about "new and emerging technologies" into policy statements. Detailed instructions or guidelines are provided in an accompanying standard operating procedure or similar document. Employees should know whether it's OK to set up Facebook

## Social media guidelines

These tips for employees are adapted from the Social Media Guidelines Wiki (<http://socialmediaguidelines.pbworks.com>), which was produced collaboratively online by educators and other experts.

- Employees should be mindful of the information they post. Online behavior should reflect the same standards as those used for face-to-face communications. Deleted information may be stored and retrieved indefinitely, while information marked "private" rarely is, and may be forwarded easily, even by someone you trust.

- Ensure that content reflects and is consistent with the work you do for your district. Once you identify yourself as a school or district employee, or former employee, you are automatically connected with colleagues nationwide.

- Don't use e-mail, text messaging, instant messaging, or social networking sites to discuss non-school-related issues with students. Homework, class activities, athletics, extracurricular activities, parent nights, choral concerts, and other school activities represent appropriate topics of discussion. Keep relationships with students professional at all times.

- Respect student and employee privacy rights and laws. Do not comment on students or confidential student matters on social networks; do not violate your co-workers' privacy, either. Professionals have tough conversations face to face and in the appropriate settings.

- View online content, including social media, as an extension of your physical classroom or building. If it's not appropriate in the classroom or out in the open at school, it's not appropriate online, either.

- Search your name online and monitor what others are saying and posting about you. Even your friends and family can post and tag (i.e., identify you by name) photos you would never consider making public. If that happens, either ask the person to remove the offending photo or make it clear that you don't support its publication.

- Identify yourself as a school employee, and don't post comments anonymously or try to hide your role. Fact-check information for accuracy before posting or sending it to another person.

- Share ideas in a respectful manner, and don't slam others online. Share expertise, and write in a conversational style that sounds as if you and another friend are chatting at the dinner table.

pages for their classrooms, school, department, or program, or whether they can post the district or school logo on their personal Web page.

As employees expand their digital footprints, they may need a reminder now and then that content they produce, even on personal pages, represents their district, profession, and public education. Content, including personal photos, that damages an employee's capacity to serve as a role

model for children or their ability to work effectively with parents could be grounds for dismissal.

Despite these concerns, social media and other forms of electronic communication can help build support for public schools while stifling rumors and disarming special interest groups. As Salter says, "In the absence of information, people fill the void with their own ideas and thoughts."

School officials need to encourage

employees to serve as ambassadors for their districts and public education, and that includes online communities. It's just a matter of teaching them how to do it wisely, and well. ■

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