

Tweet That, Like This, Check-In Here: Social Media Meets the Real World

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In this article, Marchini explores how social media policies are created and used in business, emphasizing their importance as an up-and-coming genre. Her knowledge and experience is rooted in her ENG 145 Business English course.

In this era of technology, practically everyone has a Facebook profile; beginning in August 2008, there were 100 million Facebook users worldwide, and as of October 2012, there were 1,007 million.¹ Moreover, eighty percent of those social media users prefer to connect with brands through Facebook.² People make Facebook profiles for their future children and their pets, and now it's a fad for grandparents! My third cousin twice removed from Italy, my pastor, and my grandmother all have social media profiles. Twitter and Foursquare are also becoming more and more popular as time goes on. Compared to other communication methods (blimps, emails, televised announcements, or print ads), using social media is the best way to contact a massive amount of people in a rapid manner, whether the news is that Miley Cyrus has gotten even crazier or that Ellen DeGeneres will be showing up at your local Best Buy on Black Friday.

Businesses are trying harder and harder every minute to “get with it” or “get with the in-crowd.” In this situation, the “in-crowd” would be considered their customers and stakeholders. Businesses will do whatever they need to get the scoop, get the word out, and create a buzz. Thankfully most businesses have caught on and gotten on the “social-media bandwagon.”

Many businesses have Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, and sometimes they even keep a blog. To us it seems so simple for businesses to keep up with the social ages; they just need to like things, post things, poke things, tweet things, or whatever else is expected of the social media package. But what may go right over our heads (as customers) is that using social media is not as simple for businesses as it is for us on the other side of things. Rules and guidelines need to be put into place before any company social networking takes place. Most businesses have a mission statement that sets the morals and line of ethics that businesses are committed to follow. And when it comes to using social media, these morals still need to be followed consistently. Businesses sometimes hire a specific person to use social media on behalf of the company and to keep up with the different types of social media, as they grow, to cater to the over one-trillion people using them. But many businesses do not have a specific position for this task and just have different employees post for them, hence the need for regulations regarding company social media use.

The way businesses go about putting their social media activity in line is with an In-House Social Media Policy. This semester, I learned how to create one, learning which aspects of the genre are absolutely necessary and which depend on the company's style and culture. To investigate how these policies work, I created one for a fictional sports store called Champion Sports. Through my research, I learned that the goal of a social media policy is to monitor social media in order to learn about and regulate what stakeholders are sharing and saying about a company and its employees. If a business is going to participate in social media, it is going to need one of these.

At first, I had no clue where to start . . . I created a few rules that I thought would be necessary, such as: 1) refraining from posting on personal accounts while on company time or computers; 2) not posting personal opinions, but rather, only posting the opinions of the company as a whole; and 3) not posting anything sexist, racist, or in any way offensive to anyone or to a certain group of people. But I could tell I was not even close to being done. So then I began my research, and I quickly realized that there was so much more to a social media policy document than I had ever expected. It was incredible to see how much work had gone into these policies, a new and yet very important genre. Some companies had extremely developed and thorough policies, while others were not as detailed, depending on the company's atmosphere and needs.

An example of an extremely detailed policy would be the one created by the U.S. Department of the Interior.³ This governmental entity covered everything from different Acts (for instance, the Freedom of Information Act) to Intellectual Property in their comprehensive policy. On the other hand, the Adidas Group had an extremely basic and to-the-point policy, containing

twelve basic guidelines.⁴ This comparison is a great example of how policies can be extremely different but still reach the company's goal, depending on the culture of the company. There were general items and conventions that were repetitive and consistent among the different policies I researched. Some of these included the following: professional and concise descriptions of each section, mandating the use of appropriate ethics when conducting social media related activities, an overview and/or goal for the policy, ensuring that the entire policy revolves around the mission and culture of the company, as well as various specific regulations, to name a few.

The most helpful website I referenced was our very own Illinois State University marketing social media standards and social networking identity web page, which I found with some assistance from my Business English instructor.⁵ The formatting for the entire document was very professional (it was pleasing to the eye—the structure of the document was neat, obviously created by a professional), but at the same time, the policy was extremely understandable, which some companies tend to struggle with. I continued researching, finding several different useful sources, including an article on Costco's social media policy,⁶ an article offering tips for drafting social media policies,⁷ and a database of several different companies' social media policies,⁸ which I found either through advice from my instructor or by conducting a simple Google search of my topic—another great way to get the brainstorming started!

After conducting this research, I began to make a list of what was necessary for the social media policy of my fabricated business. This list covered many topics, including the values of the company (leadership, connectivity to the sports world and customers, responsibility, etc.) and confidentiality. I knew these weren't my final needs or wants for the policy, but it was a good start. I had to figure out what I knew I wanted in my policy and what content I should include to accompany the professional formatting of the document. Occasionally, some of the examples that I stumbled upon did not seem relevant to my imaginary business. For example, the U.S. Department of the Interior's policy referenced governmental Acts that would not necessarily pertain to another company, like the Adidas Group, for instance. Because the U.S. Department of the Interior is a governmental entity, the policies and guidelines need to be much stricter than those of the Adidas shoe company.

After I established exactly what I needed in my policy, I created the table of contents. My table of contents looked similar to many of the examples I found, but it did have some differences, only because my "company" did not need as many categories as some of the examples had, and I wanted to stick to the basics. The tables of contents from some of the examples I referenced included sections like "Section 508," "Records Management Retention and

Archiving,” “Information Quality,” and “Availability and Disclaimer,” to name a few categories that I chose not to include. These sections pertained to those particular companies and were developed from years of social media use. For example, “Section 508” is in reference to a certain part of a specific company’s bi-laws; thus, this section does not need to be consistent for all social media policies. In the table of contents I created, I decided to divide the policy into two different sections: Section 1, “Social Media and Social Networking Policy,” and Section 2, “Regulations and Policies of Social Media.” While many of the examples I found had two or three sections in their policies, and usually the first section was an introduction, I decided that having both an “Introduction” and an “Overview of Policy” section was redundant and repetitive for readers. The first section of my policy included the broader topics of the policy: “The Overview of Policy,” “Official Use of Social Media,” and “Social Networking and Non-Official/ Personal Use of Social Media and Social Networking.” The second section included much more narrow and specific topics: “Responsibility,” “Accuracy,” “Copyrights and Fair Use,” “Confidentiality,” “Branding of the Company,” “Site,” “Stay Connected,” “Respond,” “Judgment,” and “Don’t Spam.”

The first item in Section 1, “Overview of Policy,” is essential because it offers a general synopsis of the policy and establishes the purpose for the document. It gives an idea to the readers (and/or employees) what will be contained in the document and where to find what they are specifically searching for. All of the policies I reviewed in my research have an overview of the policy, which is why I originally knew I should include it. The overview I wrote is as follows:

Overview of Policy:

This policy has been established in order to create organization and professionalism within the social networking of the company. This document highly supports the use of social networking and for no reason discourages the opportunity to expand our networking and to give customers what they want. This is a standard guide that should be followed when social networking for the company Champion Sports.

The next item in section 1, “Official Use of Social Media and Social Networking” (below), contains an explanation as to why social networking and social media are important for the business to participate in, and it also contains the listing of social media sources that the company is allowed to use and contribute to. The examples I researched all listed the different social media sources that the company is entitled to use. I decided to use a

broad range of these sources for my company. I have found that using a large number of possible sources gives your company room to grow and feasible goals for social media in the future.

Official Use of Social Media and Social Networking:

It is encouraged to participate in Social Media and Networking, considering current generational trends. It is the best way to reach the public with our mission and messages pertaining solely to the company.

Social Media Approved: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Flickr, and YouTube.

This contract includes but is not limited to: Media Sharing, Blogging, Social Networking, Document and Data sharing repositories, Social Bookmarking, Widgets (GoogleMaps: add this, Facebook: “like” button, Twitter: tweet this).

The last item in section one is “Non-Official/Personal Use of Social Media and Social Networking,” which explains what is and what is not expected of employees dealing with social media. It explains rules regarding the use of a personal account on a company computer and how posting on a personal account can affect the business, in addition to offering a clear example of a “company social media accident.” I realized that this was a vital portion of the document because it encompasses, at least initially, the entire purpose of the policy. Employees need to understand where the line is drawn and when they can and cannot post using the company’s equipment but in such a way so that they continue to feel respected as employees. After referencing a few of my research examples, I decided that the wording I chose (below) was a happy medium and would get the goal of my guidelines across company-wide.

Non-Official Use/Personal Use of Social Media:

When using Social Media for personal use, be aware of the association you are portraying with our company. Anything that is posted on your personal profile or account may be seen by any of our customers or the public eye. For this reason, we ask that you do not use your personal social media accounts on a work computer. Doing this could lead to accidents or mishaps that will never be erased (nothing can be hidden on the internet). Although we expect the best intentions from our employees, accidents are bound to happen. For example, it could simply be that an employee wants to wish his or her mother a happy birthday. He or she decides to use a work computer to go on Facebook and send the birthday message. What the employee doesn’t realize is that the company, Champion Sports,

is still logged in to Facebook. The public would then see Champion Sports wishing “mom” a happy birthday. This would not be the worst scenario, but it would still confuse our customers and the public.

After all the rules and basics were out of the way in Section 1, I used Section 2, “Regulations and Policies of Social Media,” to get into the finer details and to list all of the rules and reasons for each. This is similar to how several of my researched examples approached the specifics of their policies, including “Illinois State University’s Graphics Guidelines” and “adidas Group Social Media Guidelines.” Below is an excerpt from Section 2 of my document. In my complete project, I also included several other items within Section 2, including: “Represent,” “Branding of the Company,” “Site,” “Administration,” “Stay Connected and Respond,” not included in this article. I decided these sections were significant due to their content and consistency in the sources I researched.

Responsibility

When posting and using the different sources of social media, please ensure information is professional, accurate, and relevant to the conversation taking place. If you are for some reason attempting to post on your personal account, be aware of what you are saying and where you are putting this information and these opinions.

Accuracy

It is important to take the time to learn about an issue or topic before posting. It is helpful to others to provide citations and links for different topics discussed on social media. If there was something posted by mistake, please be sure to correct it, and apologize as soon as possible. Depending on the mistake, you may be let go or put on probation.

Copyrights and Fair Use

Please remember to credit others for their ideas, plans, and work. Do not post work by others without the proper permission and/ or citation of the work. Many times people do not realize that they are stealing others’ work; please be conscious of what you are typing, posting, and saying.

Confidentiality

Please respect the workforce and the confidentiality of Champion Sports: not just Champion Sports as a whole, but also each individual employee. Do not share information that is or was not meant to be for the public or common knowledge.

Through my research and experience creating my own, I learned that there are some important “final touches” writers should address in order to create an effective Social Media Policy; here are four defining characteristics that should be considered:

- **Understandable Diction:** Write descriptions of each category that are easily understandable, and include the reasoning behind that rule or regulation.
- **Ethics:** Keep the policy ethical and include details on which ethics need to be addressed while keeping up with social media.
- **Organized Sections:** Each section should be organized and divided to accommodate those who will be reading the policy, insuring simplicity and readers’ ability to understand the content.
- **Detailed Explanations:** Each section will need a detailed explanation of what each section means, what it will do or change for the social media experience, and why it was created.

Once I revised to be sure that I had these four necessities in place, I knew that the policy was finally complete. Another final touch included creating a cover page for my document. The cover page should include the name of the company, the title of the document (in this case it would be “In-House Social Media Policy”), and the company’s logo. The end product of my policy was five full pages, including the cover page. My last step was to do one last run through of editing for grammar and punctuation, just to be sure there were no errors in the document.

By learning the basics of creating an In-House Social Media Policy, any company should be able to keep up with this generation and sift out any social networking issues. Social networking for a company may have, at one time, seemed fairly simple, but after learning about this genre, I hope you now understand the necessity for a Social Media Policy in the workplace. With this genre, any company can easily keep up with over one-billion Facebook users and effortlessly compete with the latest Miley Cyrus newsflash (tough competition, I know).

Endnotes

1. Statista. “Number of monthly active Facebook users worldwide from 3rd quarter 2008 to 2nd quarter 2013 (in millions).” 2013. <http://www.statista.com/statistics/37545/number-of-active-facebook-users/>. This statistic was given in graph form and has many more details about the different years, but this contrast in users stood out to me the most. It was extremely interesting,

and I knew it would be interesting to those wanting to learn more about social networking, both in business settings and altogether.

2. Jorgenson, Kevin. “Facebook Marketing Statistics You Need to Know.” Business2Community. 24 September 2012. <http://www.business2community.com/facebook/facebook-marketing-statistics-you-need-to-know-0289953>. Business2Community presents an article on different social media statistics that are extremely helpful in creating your business’ social media plan. This article analyzes the necessity for marketing through social networking and also how important marketing is from the consumer’s point of view.
3. Lee-Ashley, Matt. “Notices - Social Media Policy.” U.S. Department of the Interior. 18 November 2010. <http://www.doi.gov/notices/Social-Media-Policy.cfm>. This Social Media Policy created by a governmental source has a unique style that achieves its goal.
4. Escribano, Felix. “adidas Group Social Media Guidelines.” Adidas Group. 2011. <http://blog.adidas-group.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/adidas-Group-Social-Media-Guidelines1.pdf>. A great example of a simple policy that was created by the Adidas Group.
5. Illinois State University Marketing and Communications. “Graphic Standards for Social Networking.” 2013. http://advancement.illinoisstate.edu/downloads/identity/ISU_SocialNetworkingIdentity.pdf. To help understand how an In-House Social Media Policy should look, the University uses one that is a great reference. It is easy to see how this document is organized and structured, which serves as a great model for those writing their own.
6. Katz, David M. “NLRB to Costco: Your Social Media Policy Needs a Do-Over.” *The National Law Review*. 25 September 2012. <http://www.natlawreview.com/article/nlrb-to-costco-your-social-media-policy-needs-do-over>. A great article I used to help understand the necessity for a social media policy, discussing an incident reported about Costco and their social media activities.
7. Appenteng, Kwabena. “4 tips for employers drafting social media policies.” *Inside Counsel*. 17 August 2012. <http://www.insidecounsel.com/2012/08/17/4-tips-for-employers-drafting-social-media-policie>. This source I found gave four quick tips for companies creating a Social Networking Policy. This resource helped me to understand the tone to use so that employees still feel respected.
8. Boudreaux, Chris. “Social Media Governance.” 2013. <http://socialmediagovernance.com/policies.php>. I discovered this database, which provides access to access to hundreds of companies’ Social Media Guidelines. I used this source to develop a lot of my research.



Maddy Marchini is a third year undergraduate studying Marketing at Illinois State. She is planning to be an event planner for a large corporation or business but has always loved creative writing and telling stories, even to brighten up a duller topic like the business world. Maddy loves to dance and help people, even if it's just to help them find their smile.