



Preach the Gospel at All Times

Guidelines for Evangelizing Through Social Media

INTRODUCTION

Pope Francis constantly urges us to “go into the streets, to the outer reaches of society” with words of mercy and hope. Social media is one potent way of doing this. As Pope Benedict has said, “The world of digital communication, with its almost limitless expressive capacity, makes us appreciate all the more St. Paul’s exclamation, ‘Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel.’”

Since the time of St. Francis himself, Franciscans have been on the cutting edge of spreading the Gospel message in new ways and to new places. It’s no wonder, then, that so many in the Franciscan family have found the modern tools of electronic communication to be a fruitful and powerful way to continue that tradition of evangelization. Social media and electronic communication provide friars and partners-in-ministry with a way to exchange information and ideas faster and farther than ever before. Because this electronic frontier is also one with its own dangers and pitfalls, it is the hope that this *Social Media Guideline* can help navigate that new territory so that Franciscans might make the best use of these exciting tools of communication and evangelization.

As background, the online encyclopedia Wikipedia defines **social media** as “media designed to be disseminated through social interaction, using highly accessible and scalable publishing techniques. Social media use Web-based technologies to transform and broadcast media monologues into social media dialogues.” Social media commonly refers to (but is not limited to) the following Web- or app-based protocols: Facebook, Twitter, blogs, and YouTube. Since the landscape of social media is constantly changing, this list could be in a near constant state of evolution.

Through photos, words and videos, social networking sites can be used to post a variety of items and themes – announcements, homilies, reflections, event dates, links, catechetical and prayer resources, and follow-up about significant events. In addition to communicating specific information, they can strengthen the sense of community both within provinces and among our partners-in-ministry.

There is little doubt that the Internet provides those who serve the Gospel with a creative opportunity to share the Word and the uniqueness of our Franciscan way of life in imaginative, immediate, and engaging ways.

Social media offer both opportunities and challenges to those who use them. Precisely because of the ability to disseminate information worldwide so quickly and easily, it is essential that these resources be used in a professional, mature and responsible manner.

GUIDELINES

The following guidelines and cautions are provided as an aid to effective use of social media. Sloppy use of this means of communication will result in constituents being confused by the information offered, or worse, by receiving a negative impression of the Franciscans. When using social media and other electronic communications, Franciscan organizations — including friars, staff and volunteers — are advised to keep in mind the following:

1. All communication by friars and partners-in-ministry mirrors the Church and the Order. Social media are a global platform. Once something is posted, it is available and visible to anyone in the world who visits that site. Mindful of the public nature of social media, all content should be characterized by charity and should not contradict the vision and mission of our Franciscan way of life. Staff members and ministry volunteers are encouraged to keep in mind these guidelines.
2. All publicly available online information (profile information, postings, updates, and the like) should be consistent with the same professional Codes of Conduct followed in other public areas of ministry.
3. Images (photos, videos and graphics) are powerful. Care should be taken in the selection of the images posted assuring that all photos and videos are appropriate and respectful. Specifically, the following should *never* be posted:
 - Images that contain any level of nudity
 - Images that are provocative or suggestive
 - Images that contain a child alone or children by themselves (with no adult in the photo) unless specifically ministry related and the permission of a parent or guardian has been obtained in line with the policies of your respective province and diocese.
 - Images that contain personal or identifying information (names, addresses, phone numbers, license plates, etc.)
 - Images that depict an illegal act or activity
 - Images that contain vulgar symbols or gestures
 - Images that are likely to be offensive to a reasonable person
4. The fact that online information is widely available should always be kept in mind. Though privacy settings are available, very little information can be limited to a small audience. Deleting information, posts, photos and comments is often possible but sometimes difficult. What is posted will be visible for a long time.
5. Interaction with minors through social media requires caution. Because the safety of children is always our priority in ministry, a few important reminders regarding appropriate interaction with minors through social media should be kept in mind:
 - Be sure to obtain permission from a minor's parent/guardian before contacting the minor via social media or before posting pictures, video, and information that may identify that minor. Frequently, written permission is obtained.
 - Make parents aware if social media are being used by their minor children in relation to your ministry.
 - Save copies of conversations whenever possible, especially those that concern personal sharing. (This may be especially important with text messaging.)
 - Adhere to the policy of your local diocese
6. Aim to keep posts appropriate, clear, respectful and always characterized by charity.

7. Be responsible. When in doubt about the content or tone of a post, leave it out. Although the style of social media text is informal, text should avoid sounding immature or unprofessional.
8. Be mindful that text does not always convey tone. Be cautious in the wording of posts (especially sarcasm meant as humour) since tone can often be misunderstood.
9. Identify yourself: authenticity and transparency are driving factors in the blogosphere and social media. When appropriate, provide your name and your role at your organization when you blog about topics that are related to your mission.
10. Respect the privacy of others. Do not publish or cite personal details and photographs of employees, volunteers, members of a ministry community, etc., without their permission.
11. Always comply with copyright laws and requirements.
12. Post a clear Code of Conduct for visitors to organizational websites and/or social media accounts. Do not allow defamatory, libellous, or slanderous speech. Example: “All posts and comments should be marked by 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. Violations to these rules will be deleted.”
13. Monitor postings regularly and remove posts that do not abide by site policy or individual standards. It’s your site/page and you can police it as you see fit.
14. If problems arise with objectionable posts, consider strengthening privacy settings as a way to prevent postings from people whose topics or tone may be objectionable.
15. While anyone is free to create and maintain personal websites and social media content, users should be mindful that even personal sites must reflect Catholic and Franciscan values. It is important to understand that we are witnessing to the faith and to our Franciscan way of life through all social networking, whether organizational or individual. On personal sites like blogs, it is recommended to include a disclaimer, such as “The views expressed on this site are mine alone and do not necessarily reflect the views of my employer.”
 - a. Be careful about online associations. The people and organizations (pages, groups) with whom you connect (“like” or join) convey an image. (Ex: A status update such as “Br. John likes ‘Let’s burn down churches’” would arouse curiosity and probably concern.) On social media sites, be alert to the links on your profile page and what they convey. The image and intent of followers and friends affect one’s own image.
 - b. Never disclose confidential information about yourself, individuals or the organizations you serve.

CONCLUSION

The English Speaking Conference of the Order of Friars Minor strongly encourages the use of social media by its members. These tools serve as an effective way to spread the Gospel and our Franciscan spirituality, to make visible the good works that we do in so many places, and to prove to be a valuable way to recruit vocations to our way of life.

By keeping in mind that every post and comment — both text and images — convey an impression of a person, our Franciscan ministry and a province, the posts can be a valuable method of sharing the Gospel. As is attributed to St. Francis, “preach the Gospel and, when necessary, use words.”

Additional information is available from a variety of resources, including:

- Website of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, from which sections of this document are based
<http://www.usccb.org/about/communications/social-media-guidelines.cfm>
- Pontifical Council for Social Communications, “The Church and the Internet”
http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/pccs/documents/rc_pc_pccs_doc_20020228_church-internet_en.html
- Praesidium <http://www.praesidiuminc.com/>

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