

## Developing a Social Media Plan to Support Substance Misuse Prevention Efforts

It wasn't so long ago that the idea of creating a website for your prevention program or organization was new and exciting, with so much to learn and do to make it happen. Today, static websites no longer make the grade. With the advent of social media, such as *Facebook* and *YouTube*, people increasingly expect opportunities to comment, share, discuss, and collaborate online.

Yet there are hundreds of social media options to choose from, with new sites and features popping up all the time. While the rapid pace of technology may make the thought of jumping on board the social media train feel daunting, a well-conceived plan can help ensure a smooth ride. To develop this plan, you will need to take a step back and think through why and how you intend to use social media to support your prevention efforts. Once you have a solid plan in place, you can board that train and feel confident that it will take you where you want to go!

A social media communications plan should include the following six steps:

### Step 1. Establish Goals

What do you hope to achieve by using social media? Try to think broadly about this, considering both short- and long-term goals. For example, you may consider adding a blog to your website to share updates about current prevention activities. The possibilities are endless!

The world of social media offers you the capacity for ongoing communication, collaboration, and even social change. As your understanding of and comfort using social media deepen, consider its potential to influence—not just connect with—community members. For example, you might engage local youth in helping to shape the online conversation about drug use and prevention in your community. Or you might use social media to raise awareness about and gather signatures petitioning for a much-needed policy change to support prevention efforts.

### Step 2. Clarify Roles

Who should participate in your social media efforts? Include folks who are experienced, motivated, and able to dedicate their time to both planning and implementing your social media strategies. Who are the recognized “early technology adopters” in your agency? Who's logging onto Facebook or Twitter in their spare time or blogging about their recent trip abroad? Who might be new to social media, but ready and willing to learn more? As you identify these individuals, consider what each person brings to the table. Tech experience? Design know-how? Comfort “speaking” online?

And, if you have any connections with young people, be sure to include them in your social media planning! Growing up immersed in high-tech devices and online forums that support near

constant communication and information exchange, today's youth are being referred to as digital natives. They are fluent in the language of technology, well-versed in the practices of social media, and eager for more. They are likely to possess just the knowledge and talent you need to get your social media efforts up and running.

### Step 3. Develop an Image

How will you present yourself online? Communications materials (logos, mission statements, or brochures) that work well in print don't always transfer well to the world of social media. To create a more social media-savvy image:

- **Develop a brief and memorable acronym or nickname to use online.** Many prevention programs and organizations come with lengthy, descriptive titles that lose their punch online. They also take up too much "digital real estate." Twitter messages, or "tweets," must be 140 characters or less. You don't want to use up the bulk of your tweet simply stating your name!
- **Simplify your language.** Remove formal language and excess jargon. Mission and vision statements that make sense in grant proposals and progress reports can appear awkward online. Consider reworking these for use in more casual, conversational online forums.
- **Think visual.** The virtual world is a visual world. Consider using a creative and colorful logo, icon, or photograph to represent your program and/or organization. Once you feel good about your image, use it widely and consistently across all of your social media platforms. In other words, do some branding!

### Step 4. Select Tools

The world of social media is expansive. Platforms include social networking sites such as *Facebook*; blogs such as *Blogger*; microblogs such as *Twitter* and *Tumblr*; and image and video sharing sites such as *Flickr*, *Vimeo*, and *YouTube*. Each serves a different purpose, and choosing the right platform—given your target audience and goals—is critical.

When selecting a platform, first zero in on whom you want to reach (be very specific). Then figure out the best way to reach them. Talk to members of your target audience to find out which social media tools they prefer and how they use them. Think carefully about the kind of information you want to share and how you want your audience to use it.

Then you want to match your message to the proper communication channel. For example:

- If you want to offer lengthy updates or provide detailed information about specific topics, add a blog to your website.
- If you have a great set of photos or compelling videos from recent events, post them on photo and video sharing sites.
- If you need to communicate urgently or frequently with program participants about ongoing tasks and projects, try texting or tweeting them.

Keep in mind that these tools have incredible overlap. Use this overlap to your advantage. Provide links to all that you do, everywhere you do it.

## Step 5. Determine Content

Social media is all about interaction. Any content posted to these sites will—by definition—invite commentary. Rich online discussion means welcoming many points of view, including those you or your organization may not agree with. Think carefully about which messages you feel comfortable opening up to unpredictable responses and be prepared to handle a wide range of questions and comments. Using social media in the world of prevention may be challenging, but the pay-off in terms of community reach and engagement can be significant!

### Tips for Inviting Interaction

- **Mix it up.** Share information and ideas in as many ways as possible—use text, photos, drawings, slides, and video. Don't be afraid to experiment!
- **Make it count.** Give people something to talk about by posting content that is engaging and thought-provoking. Ask yourself, would you respond to what you just posted?
- **Think small.** You may be hoping for big results in the end, but small steps can get you there. Remember that each and every comment, "like," and "tweet" you get brings you closer to your goals.
- **Be present.** Make sure that program representatives routinely monitor and actively participate in your social media efforts. Social media requires frequent content updates.
- **Stay current.** Social media tools are continually evolving, with new tricks of the trade popping up often. Visitors—particularly youth—will be quick to notice if your social media efforts are out of date.
- **Don't talk at people.** Engage your audience. Invite responses and encourage people to interact with one another as well as with program/organization representatives. Think of your messages as magnets: opportunities to attract people and draw them into conversations.
- **Show more than you tell.** Thoughtful and engaging messages are important, but never underestimate the value of images in the virtual world. Capitalize on the visual nature of social media to capture and keep people's attention.
- **Be positive—sure of yourself and affirming of others.** Create safe and comfortable spaces for people to come together online. Think carefully about what you want to say and how you want to say it, and establish policies that support open and honest—yet civil and respectful—interactions. With each positive social media action you take, you are building social capital for your program and organization.

## Step 6. Evaluate and Refine Efforts

Monitor your social media efforts and work toward improving your messages and overall approach over time. Pay careful attention to the concrete numbers: How many people have "friended" or "liked" your program? How many comments have you received on your latest blog entry? Did more people participate in a program or show up to an event after you started using social media for publicity? How many tweets are exchanged among program staff and the community?

And, since social media is all about interaction, look closely at the nature of the input and feedback you are receiving. What seems to be working well? Do more of that! What is not working very well? Think about how you can modify your approach. Down the road, consider how to assess whether your social media efforts are having a real impact on knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors in the community.

## Give it Some Time

Don't be discouraged if your social media efforts are not immediately rewarded—this is perfectly normal. Allow for a learning curve, as well as time to build and expand your online presence. It won't happen overnight, but it will happen. With careful planning and preparation, social media tools can help you establish a compelling online identity, publicize your prevention activities, spread your prevention messages, and both build and maintain relationships with colleagues and community members.

*Disclaimer:* Any use of trade, product, or firm names is for descriptive purposes only and does not imply endorsement by SAMHSA's Center for the Application of Prevention Technologies.

## References

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