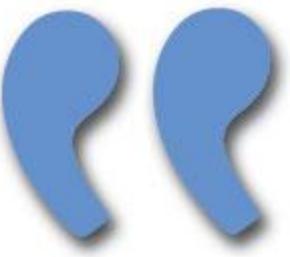# Social Media Policies

An Introduction

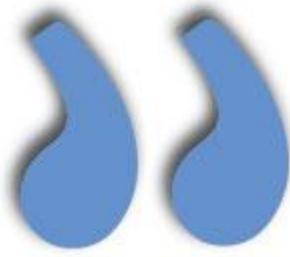dave fleet

CONVERSATIONS AT THE INTERSECTION OF COMMUNICATIONS, PR AND SOCIAL MEDIA

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Why care about a social media policy?

- Despite what some people say, rules still apply when it comes to social media.

- Some of those rules may be similar to those you already have in your organization; others may be different.

- Policies provide structure – for you and for your colleagues/employees.

Policies both protect and enable

- A good social media policy clearly outlines:
  - What the company will and will not do online.
  - What employees can and cannot do online.
  - What members of the public can and cannot do on company properties.
- It protects the organization by setting boundaries around what is acceptable and what is unacceptable.
- It empowers employees by letting them know what the limits are, so they can use social media tools acceptably without fear of repercussion.

Think about the stakeholders
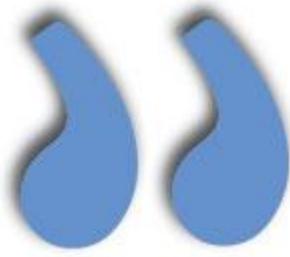
- Who else needs to be involved in developing your policies?
  - Senior Management
    - Need buy-in from the top if policies are to be effective.
  - Marketing, PR
    - If these departments aren't driving the policy development, they will likely be active stakeholders.
  - I.T.
    - May already have limits on sites which employees can access.
  - H.R.
    - May affect existing employee guidelines.
    - May have labour relations implications.
  - Legal
    - IT and HR will likely call on legal counsel anyway; get them on-side by involving them early.
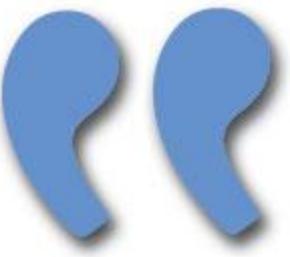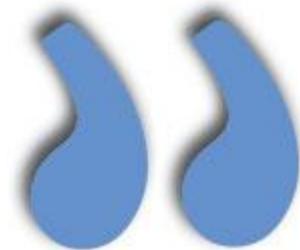
Different aspects of policies to consider
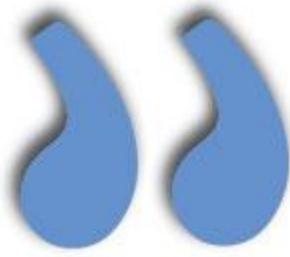
- Internal
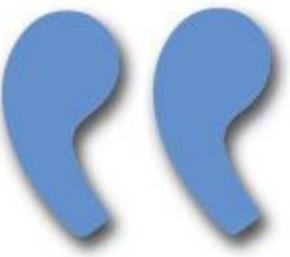 - Target audience: employees
- External
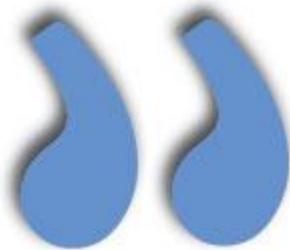 - Target audience: consumers
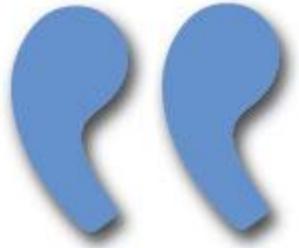
INTERNAL POLICIES

Internal Policies

- Set the boundaries for what employees can and cannot do.
- Some parts may already exist within current employee guidelines.
- May or may not be posted for those outside the organization to see.
- Consider three areas:
  - General guidelines
  - Employee blogging
 - Engagement by employees
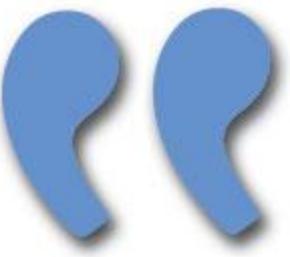
General Guidelines

- Consider:
    - **Boundaries** - are employees actively encouraged to engage in conversations regarding the organization (may depend on organizational culture)?
    - **Transparency** - are employees required to identify themselves as employees when discussing the organization? (likely: yes)?
    - **Confidentiality** - may employees discuss confidential information?
        - Most organizations' existing employee policies will cover this.
    - **Financials** - may employees discuss financial information? (no)
        - Most organizations' existing employee policies will cover this.
    - **Consequences** - outline the consequences both for the company and the employee when someone says something ill-advised
    - **Work use** – is social media use permitted during work hours (may differ depending on whether employees are encouraged to engage in conversations regarding the organization)?

Employee Blogging
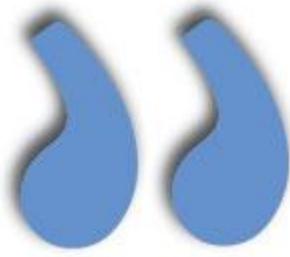
- Consider:
  - **Advice** - consider giving best-practice tips on things like transparency, disclosure, human voice, etc. Not necessarily rules; guidelines for how to approach the medium with a minimum of risk and maximum effect.
  - **Attribution** – state that if employees cite content created by others, they should acknowledge it.
  - **Copyright** – may employees use the organization's logo, name etc (you may want to restrict their use)? Also consider stating that employees should not violate the copyright of others.
  - **Ownership** – who owns the content of employee blogs, along with the responsibility for the content?.
  - **Confidentiality** - as with the employee guidelines below, consider stating explicitly that employees should not disclose confidential information. It's common sense, but you should be explicit.
  - **Disclaimer** – should employees state that they are writing as themselves, not as representatives of the company (unless they are)?
  - **Existing policies** – note that the blogging police does not supercede other existing policies, and that employees must continue to abide by those.

Engagement by Employees
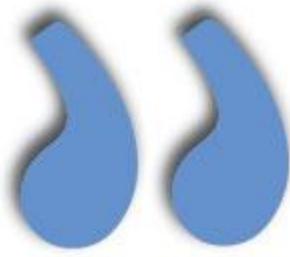
- Your general guidelines may cover the boundaries for employee engagement – who may or may not engage in conversations relating to the company.

- If you encourage employees to engage in such conversations, consider framing them with simple guidelines:

  - **Do no harm** – may employees attack competitors via their comments?

    - Consider the potential harm to your reputation if this is discovered.

  - **Transparency** – if commenting on a work-related discussion, should employees disclose their affiliation/conflict of interest?

EXTERNAL POLICIES
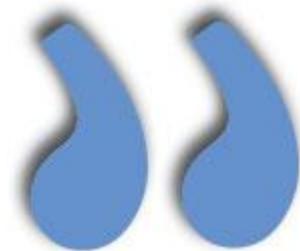
External Policies
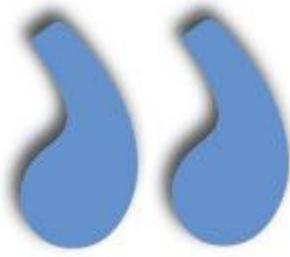
- Set the expectations and boundaries for behaviour of people outside your company.

- Posted publicly on your corporate website/other online properties.

- Consider two areas:
  - Comment moderation
  - Online interaction

Comment Moderation

- Sets the boundaries for acceptable behaviour on company properties.
- Consider:
  - **Language and manners:** Will you reject comments which include offensive or inappropriate language?
  - **Personal attacks:** Will you allow personal attacks?
    - In an ideal world you might allow people to question or argue your company's content – after all, this medium is about conversation. However as we all know, this isn't an ideal world.
    - Even if you do allow criticism, consider outlawing aggressive attacks.
  - **On-topic comments:** What will you do with comments that veer away from the topic of the post or other peoples' comments?
  - **Comment spam:** Will you allow comments that appear to be spam?
  - **Number of links:** Do you want to limit the number of links that you will allow? Will you use no-follow links?
  - **Blocking:** Will you take action against repeat offenders?
  - **Contact:** Will you provide a way for commenters to contact someone if their comment is not approved, or if they have other questions?

Online Interaction

- Sets the expectations for the way your company will behave online.
- Consider:
  - **Conversations:**
    - **Spam and off-topic comments:** Will you respond to spam or off-topic comments?
    - **Defamation:** You may want to avoid responding to defamatory remarks.
    - **Misinformation:** Ideally, you should aim to correct misinformation as soon as possible.
      - Remember, if people don't see a correction they may assume an incorrect statement to be true.
    - **Dissent:** What's your approach to commenters who simply disagree with you?
      - Will you debate with them? Will you avoid the conversation? Where do you draw the line between dissent and trolling?
  - **Standards:**
    - **Timeliness:** Assuming your processes allow for it (which they ideally should), consider stating that you will reply to online comments as soon as possible, within a defined period of time.
      - If you will not have 24/7 coverage for online conversations, say so. Companies have been criticised for not responding to issues during the weekend, for example.
    - **Honesty and accuracy:** Consider stating that you will take all possible steps to ensure that what you post is complete and accurate.
    - **Error correction:** Make it clear that if you post something that you discover is inaccurate, you will endeavour to correct it immediately.
    - **Confidentiality:** Publicly state that you will not discuss confidential information.
    - **Disclosure:** Note that when employees engage in public conversations about the organization, they will disclose their affiliation.

Resources

- Numerous links to examples of social media policies and articles on the topic
  - http://delicious.com/davefleet/policies

- Todd Defren's excellent template for employee-focused guidelines
  - http://bit.ly/1YzEfZ

- The original blog posts behind this ebook
  - Intro: http://bit.ly/3M2LV
  - Internal: http://bit.ly/1Hw20T
  - External: http://bit.ly/1ldGX8

Thanks to Michael O'Connor Clarke for his help and thoughts on this topic.

About the Author
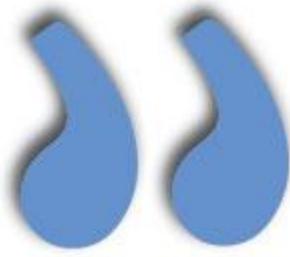
Dave Fleet is the Account Director, Social Media at Thornley Fallis Communications – a full-service public relations and web development agency.

Dave has also worked in marketing and communications for major corporations and public sector organisations including Hitachi Europe, Lloyds TSB and the Ontario government.

While Dave works for Thornley Fallis, these opinions are his and his alone, and do not reflect the views or policies of his employer.

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