

Social Media Policy: Now, More Important Than Ever

04.03.17 | Linda J. Rosenthal, JD



Part of the New Year's recommended checkup for each nonprofit is a review of existing governance policies and a plan to adopt ones that are missing.

A written social media policy is often omitted from suggested governance document lists, because the explosion and huge impact of social media is so new.

In an [earlier post](#), we noted that "[s]ocial media has been described as a 'Wild West' that nonprofits must 'tame.'" There are many unknown possibilities and pitfalls; so much potential for good communication and connection as well as for inept or – worse still – intentional harm. Even the experts struggle to get a handle on workable sets of rules that can be adapted for charitable organizations.

Social Media Rule Number One

There is, however, a rule that should be on page 1 of every social media policy document. To paraphrase a famous leader: "Don't do stupid stuff." In other words, think before you hit the "send" button. Don't post anything you wouldn't want your mother to see or have blasted on the front page of the New York Times.

And, as a follow-up rule, if you do post stupid stuff, don't make it worse with a faux apology. There's an old saying: "When you're in a hole, stop digging."

Nothing illustrates these points as well as a nonprofit [social media story](#) late last year that made headlines around the nation. It involved a truly offensive (personal) Facebook post about then First Lady Michelle Obama by the executive director of a nonprofit social services agency in a small community in West Virginia. There was a thumbs-up post afterward from the town's mayor. An image of the disgusting post went viral, all over the local area, and then nationally. There was an uproar that

eventually cost these two women their jobs; sparked an investigation into the organization, uncovering long-simmering problems and irregularities; and created turmoil and resentment from citizens and government officials.

Even a post on a personal social media site by a community leader “propelled a small West Virginia town into an embarrassing national spotlight.” The attempts by the two officials to control the damage were disingenuous and inept, to say the least, and did nothing to help themselves or contribute to healing in the community.

Resources for Social Media Policies

As the West Virginia brouhaha illustrates, “[t]he clear benefits to a nonprofit of establishing and maintaining an active social media presence can be gone in a flash by preventable mistakes that create public relations headaches and legal disasters.”

Social media policies – like other governance policies – are not “one-size-fits-all.” There are social media manuals and guidelines online. There is a useful workbook to help you evaluate and identify which issues your policy document should cover.

This site includes online links to many good examples by established organizations.

Conclusion

Whether your organization has an existing social media policy, or none at all, now is the time to tackle this important part of your governance arsenal.