

Introduction

The Michigan State University (MSU) Guidelines for Social Media apply to Michigan State University faculty, staff, and student employees and interns who create or contribute to blogs, wikis, social networks, virtual worlds, or any other kind of social media as part of their institutional responsibilities.¹ Social media is a great way to tell the MSU story and promoting university news and the work of faculty, staff, and students is encouraged. Rather than presenting a strict policy, Michigan State University is providing guidelines that are designed to frame acceptable and encouraged uses by members of the MSU community in social media spaces.

The online spaces in which you engage when using social media tools are visible to all. The public will perceive you as representing MSU—to them, you are the university. You may encounter unanticipated circumstances when sharing information about the university or yourself. Public response to you and what you choose to share online will vary. In order to be a positive steward of MSU, it will be helpful for you to understand social media and what it means to engage online, as well as what risks to anticipate and how to triage problems. Awareness and deliberate professionalism will enable you to participate online in a respectful, relevant way that protects the university's reputation.

Note: These guidelines do not supersede any existing MSU policy.

Social media and what it means to affiliate with MSU online

What is social media?

Defined broadly, social media encompasses communications and experiences that are:

- Distributed electronically by organizations and individuals
- Consumed on desktop and mobile devices
- Shared electronically and in print by diverse individuals
- Discussed by an engaged population

Today, social media is commonly encountered in the context of online software applications like Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, and Flickr where text, media, links, and opinions are shared, discussed, and redistributed.

How do members of the MSU community engage online?

What it means to engage online is no different than what it means to engage offline.

When communicating MSU-related messages in a work capacity, you should interact with others in ways that reflect MSU's core values—quality, inclusiveness, and connectivity. Interactions should protect and enhance the university's reputation and reflect the university brand—a commitment to hardworking excellence springing from a values-driven approach to all MSU

¹ These guidelines also apply to other individuals who create or contribute to social media on behalf of MSU (e.g., contractors or volunteers).

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does, vast capabilities to make a difference, and a way of working that values and engenders collaboration and connectivity, on campus, in communities, and around the globe.

Individuals who identify themselves as faculty, staff, or student employees of MSU within their personal social media use (e.g., a personal blog, Twitter account, or Facebook profile) are encouraged to observe the guidelines set forth in this document. In addition, the following guidelines should be practiced:

- Clearly identify who you are.
- Make it clear that the views expressed are your own.
- Consider using a standard disclaimer: “The opinions expressed here are the views of the writer and do not necessarily reflect the views and opinions of Michigan State University.”
- Do not speak on behalf of the university or portray yourself as a spokesperson for the institution.
- Do not use MSU logos or registered trademarks.
- Do not disclose financial or confidential student, faculty, staff, athletic, research, or institutional information.
- Do not share personal information or conversations of associates or partners unless you have their written permission to do so.
- Be aware of the privacy settings and user options associated with the social media tools you use and the audiences who will have access to content you publish.
- Remember that you are responsible for what you post on your own site and on the sites of others.
- Consider departmental and university-wide rules about use of MSU IT resources.
- Personal use of social media should generally take place during nonworking hours using personal computing resources (i.e., not owned or managed by MSU).

Guidelines for social media

Understanding the difference between an MSU work account and a personal account

Use professional contact information for accounts that represent a component of your work at MSU. Use personal contact information for accounts that are strictly non-work-related or accounts that are a blend of professional and personal information. If you’re not sure whether to use your personal or professional contact information, err on the side of using your personal information.

Understanding the audience

People need and expect different things. The audiences with whom you engage will represent diverse ages, genders, experiences, opinions, cultures, educational backgrounds, political ideologies, religions, and expectations. Be respectful when considering other points of view and evaluating the intentions or desires of the audience.

You are the university. The audience does not understand the internal organizational structure of the university. When you represent yourself as working for MSU or use an MSU social media

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platform, what you say is frequently heard and considered by the audience to represent the entire institution.

Using core practices

Be real. Declare yourself as a member of the MSU community with pride. Don't masquerade, use an alternate identity, or otherwise attempt to disguise your identity.

Be prepared. Engage only when you understand the platform and feel confident and prepared for success.

Be prudent. When in doubt, ask for help from a supervisor, a university communicator, or the Communications and Brand Strategy web and social media team.

Be true. Reflect Michigan State values. Be respectful, courteous, patient, and professional. Your actions in social media should align with the university's overarching policies, procedures, and guidelines.

Be responsible. Never share confidential or proprietary information about MSU or other members of the MSU community. Exercise good judgment and follow all university policies and legal requirements.

Be discerning. Recognize the dynamics and differences between personal and professional social connections as well as what is appropriate to share with the public and what should be kept private. Whether you decide to connect with family, friends, classmates, coworkers, leaders, managers, subordinates, or students (for those in a teaching or advising role), consider using alternate accounts or privacy settings and filters within your social networking tools in order to avoid interactions and sharing that could cross personal-professional boundaries, result in conflicts of interest, or otherwise compromise you or the institution.

Be aware. Never comment on anything related to legal matters, litigation, or any parties with whom MSU may be in litigation. Never participate in social media when the topic being discussed may be considered an emergency or crisis situation. Even anonymous comments may be traced back to your IP address. When in doubt, ask a manager for assistance to determine if a matter should be referred to the Communications and Brand Strategy media communications team or the Office of the General Counsel.

Understanding the platform

Social media is about interaction. Have conversations and ask questions. Respond to queries when you are the appropriate person to do so. (See the Moderating section for more detail.)

These are public venues. One or more—maybe many more—of 6.8 billion people will see your material. Remember that there is no such thing as private information on the Internet. Assume that everyone will see everything you post. Do not write anything that you would not show to your significant other, your mother, or your boss.

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It is a permanent record. You may be able to delete what you do but not the copies that are being actively distributed, critiqued, and remixed.

What you mean isn't always what is perceived. Don't forget that written communication does not have tone. It can be hard to interpret your intended meaning from online communication, especially brief statements like Twitter "tweets" and Facebook status updates. Pause and consider your words or other content and how they may be received before engaging. Be thoughtful, say what you mean, and mean what you say.

Sometimes, people choose to not be "real" online. Keep in mind that the person or group with whom you are interacting via social media may be using an alternate identity, representing polarizing views or inaccurate facts, or behaving in an otherwise inauthentic manner. Be cautious when evaluating and responding to the audience—not every post must be responded to and, in some cases, the interaction should be referred to a supervisor or communications professional.

Participating

Look before you leap. Learn as much as you can before diving in. Read the user guide/documentation and the terms of use for any social media tool you plan to use. Become familiar with the standards for conduct and practice related to the tool. If you want to successfully join a social network/community, you should understand its standards and practices.

Join communities. Become a part of communities relevant to you and try new things. You can receive and lend value to the community.

Ease into becoming an active member of the community. Be a consumer first: try the services and play with the features. When you are ready—engage. Once you begin, be prepared to interact, reply, assist, and contribute.

Add value to the conversation. If you make the conversation only about you, the community will have little interest. Share what is unique to you and what you find interesting from others. Be helpful and be present.

Play nice. Don't spam, type using all caps, be hateful, or use bad language. Share the spotlight.

Support official endorsements. It is appropriate to reiterate support for or share information about official Michigan State University endorsements (e.g., an official institutional blood drive, fundraiser, cause, etc.).

Avoid unofficial endorsements. Do not use the Michigan State University name, logo or marks, or your affiliation with the institution to endorse or promote products, opinions, or causes (e.g., vendors, service providers, products, political candidates, causes, etc.). Keep in mind that the public will perceive you as speaking for the institution.

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Respect diversity. The MSU community values and respects differences, recognizing that communities are rich because of diversity and inclusion.

Respect privacy. Confidential or proprietary information should never be disclosed. If you are not sure whether something should be shared, check with your supervisor or a communications professional. Just as you would do for campus print publications, obtain a release before publishing statements or photos of minors.

Respect copyrights, trademarks, rights of publicity, and other third-party rights. Consider whether you have permission to use third-party content, and observe all rights for copyrighted materials. A good resource on fair use/copyright is [fairuse.stanford.edu/Copyright and Fair Use Overview/chapter9/index.html](http://fairuse.stanford.edu/Copyright%20and%20Fair%20Use%20Overview/chapter9/index.html).

If you are a photographer, it's okay to post your photos on your social media site as long as they were taken in a public place. All other photography that includes people, private settings, or other content should have a release prior to posting. And be aware that others might choose to use your photos without your permission. If you don't want them shared widely, don't post them.

Keep in mind that access to material does not constitute permission to redistribute, modify, or create derivative works (e.g., using Photoshop or remixing content).

Monitoring

When, as part of your position at MSU, you manage a blog, Facebook page or group, or another site that allows participants to post comments or original posts and represents a component of MSU in an "official" way, you need to monitor posts from other participants. When a post is commercial, obscene, threatening, or otherwise violates the terms of use for the site, as site administrator it is your job to remove the offending posts. If you believe the comment demonstrates a credible threat to individuals or property, notify MSU Police Sgt. Val O'Brien at 517-355-2221. However, avoid the temptation to remove posts that are merely critical, angry, or represent a different opinion. Remember, a social media site is a means for holding a conversation. Suppressing other points of view may be a quick way to lose readers' trust.

Moderating

Moderating involves a three-phase process:

Phase 1: Listen and identify. Conversations occur in electronic and real-world locations. Know where online conversations may take place. Always be listening for MSU-related statements, requests for assistance, opinions, or frustrations from the community. Take a closer look when attention is required.

Phase 2: Evaluate. Consider the following questions:

Are you the right person to moderate comments or questions?

The answer may be yes if:

- The inquiry can be answered using publicly available information.
- Your area of expertise is related to the inquiry/statement.

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- You have received specific training and have been made responsible by the university to address this type of situation.

Have you identified something positive related to an individual's experience with MSU?

- There may be an opportunity to acknowledge the experience in a meaningful way or to share the experience via the social media tools you are using (e.g., an institutional blog, mailing list, or social network).

Have you identified something negative related to an individual's experience with MSU?

- There may be an opportunity for the university to learn from this information so that it can improve the experiences of others.

Have you identified an aggressive or volatile individual?

- You have observed inappropriate language, personal attacks, hateful behavior, or deliberate distribution of misinformation.

Has a support request been identified?

- A question has been asked.
- An individual has requested assistance.

Have you found something about MSU that is factually inaccurate?

- Inaccurate information was posted online, and the correct information is publically accessible from an official source.

Phase 3: Engage, refer, or ignore. Based on your evaluation, determine if you are the right person to moderate what was identified, and take one of the following actions:

You are the right person to moderate comments or questions.

- Engage in a helpful, positive way.

You are not the right person to moderate the instance.

- Document the instance (e.g., electronic screenshot, details regarding time and place, community response, etc.).
- Pass the information along to the appropriate unit.
- If you are unsure about where to send the information, seek guidance from your supervisor.
- If you are a supervisor, get an official unit communications staff member involved and/or contact the Communications and Brand Strategy web and social media team (517-355-2262 or webteam@cabs.msu.edu).

Positive instances related to an individual's experience with MSU

- Acknowledge the individual. Use the person's name and demonstrate that you understand what they said.
- Express support for them and/or the institution if appropriate.

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- Consider sharing the individual's experience via official institutional social media channels. When possible, provide a direct link to the original message or content (refer to documentation for the social media tool you are using to learn procedures and best practices for sharing links and media).

Negative instances related to an individual's experience with MSU

- If the communication does not relate to you or your unit, pass it along the comment to the appropriate unit.
- If the comment is general and not specific enough to pass along to any university unit, consider carefully whether to engage. Generally, it's best not to engage unless you can provide helpful information. You may always forward instances to the Communications and Brand Strategy web and social media team (webteam@cabs.msu.edu) if you believe that is necessary.
- If you do engage, acknowledge the individual. Use the person's name and demonstrate that you understand what they said.

An aggressive or volatile individual

- Do not attempt to engage, correct, or respond to the individual.
- Document the instance (e.g., electronic screenshot, details regarding time and place, community response, etc.)
- Notify a supervisor and/or the appropriate university communications staff.
- If the instance is on a social network you administer (e.g., a Facebook page), you may remove and/or moderate the instance if appropriate in accordance with the terms of use for that network.
- If you believe that comments demonstrate a credible threat to individuals or property, notify MSU Police Sgt. Val O'Brien at 517-355-2221.

A support request

- Acknowledge the request for assistance. Use the person's name and demonstrate that you understand their request.
- Provide succinct and complete information that addresses the request. If the request is for an area or topic you are not familiar with or responsible for, provide a referral to an appropriate source where an answer can be obtained.

Something published about MSU is factually incorrect

- Identify yourself and your affiliation with the institution.
- Provide a link to the correct information on the official institutional website.