

# Managing Negative Social Media

## Guidelines for Your School

This guide is to help you lessen the potential impact of negative social media posts. It outlines some steps you can use to handle negative comments, some things to keep in mind and some sources and resources for your further reading.

*This guide was developed by Canterbury Principals Groups with the Ministry of Education to support you and your staff to deal with negative social media.*



## Many schools use social media as an effective way to communicate with their school and wider community

But the 'dark side' of social media is the potential for negative incidents or comments on social media about your school or a school official. Negative issues are the exception rather than the rule, but they often get all the publicity. Negative Facebook campaigns and comments from online 'trolls' can be distressing for staff, students and parents. Have you thought about what you may be asked and what you will say?

## SETTING UP SOCIAL MEDIA PROCEDURES

It's important that the Board of Trustees has social media procedures that include privacy and acceptable use guidelines. This provides staff, students, parents and the community with clear direction when participating in your school's online community. Your procedures could include things like: protecting privacy, being honest, respecting laws, thinking about consequences. It should also have delegations and procedures stating who is responsible for monitoring, moderating and responding to posts under what circumstances (see below). The communication principles of the new Harmful Digital Communications Act 2015 will be helpful in forming your procedures.

Check your social media procedures with your legal advisor and share them with your school community. Do they link with your school's ICT/Cybersafety policy and media procedure?

The same principles of what is and is not acceptable apply to staff, students and parents when using their own social media platforms.

## WHO IS TAKING RESPONSIBILITY?

The beauty (and the curse) of social media is that virtually anyone can contribute. Someone should have overall responsibility for monitoring, moderating, posting and responding through your school's social media channels. Timeliness is key and you should screenshot and remove harmful content as soon as possible. Social media never closes!

However, it is important that any response meets your Board's social media policy and delegations. You could set up a small social media advisory team that reviews and refers any high risk posts to the person with the appropriate delegation, according to the Board's policy, for them to deal with. This is especially important where the comment refers to any person's employment.

## **PROMOTE AND WELCOME FAIR COMMENT**

Make it clear to anyone using your social media channels that you welcome their positive comments or constructive criticism – but they must play by the rules that you have set.

Let your school community know that respecting everyone, creating a safe space free of rude, unfair and unsubstantiated comments, and making it clear that comments will be moderated, will go a long way to preventing negative comments.

Refer to the communication principles of the Harmful Digital Communications Act 2015 so people are aware of the potential legal consequences.

## **OPEN DOOR POLICY**

Have an 'open door policy' that encourages parents to visit the school when issues arise, so that parents feel able to share any concerns face to face.

Respond as soon as possible to any request for a meeting, so that the concern doesn't have time to ferment and boil over into online comment.

Social media provides an easy and 'instant' vehicle for parents to share their views openly online.

## **MAP OUT A RESPONSE PLAN**

Create a process for managing the comments, positive or negative, considering the principles in this Guide.

Take your time in developing your response. While a negative comment can be damaging if it sits for too long without a response, you should take time to assess the situation before you decide how you'll deal with it.

Actively consider what response, if any, is appropriate (respond, monitor, delete or report abuse) and act accordingly.

## **DEALING WITH TROLLS**

Negative comments can be legitimate constructive criticism or nasty trolls looking for a public forum for a fight, to make them feel important by causing misery for their victim. It's important to know the difference and respond accordingly. Not everyone who disagrees with you is a troll!

There is a lot of online advice for dealing with trolls, listed in the references below. The experts say not to 'feed' the trolls, as your anger and attention is what they want and you can never win an argument with a troll. Others suggest that ignoring the troll gives them the power to silence you. Webroot suggests ignoring the troll but addressing the problem with the online 'audience'. But don't protract the negativity in an online argument for the world to see.

It is not a violation of free speech to delete offensive or abusive material that breaches your fair play policy. Similarly, click the Report Abuse button and report offensive or abusive material to external site moderators. Facebook and Twitter have policies against bullying or making threats.

Your reaction is your choice but consider the potential consequences. Whatever you decide, don't stoop to the troll's level or you risk looking as unbalanced as they are. And remember that if the troll is attacking an employee, any comment you make may breach your employer responsibilities. Talk to NZSTA for advice first.

## **MONITOR COMMENTS**

An unattended negative comment can spread quickly if not addressed. It's critical that you stay on top of your accounts by closely monitoring your social media. Social media is very public and pretty much 24/7. Check your accounts at least daily if not more frequently and on weekends too if possible.

It is a good idea to set your social media accounts to automatically notify you when someone comments or responds. Google Alerts are emails sent to you when Google finds new results that match your search item. You can use Google Alerts to monitor anything on the internet; all you need is a Google account.

## **IDENTIFY THE 'TYPE' OF NEGATIVE COMMENT**

There are degrees to negative comments, and most are not going to be the extreme, inappropriate ones.

It's important that you understand what kind of comment you're dealing with before you respond to it. Maybe a post just needs some clarification.

## **ARCHIVE AND LEARN**

Start keeping a digital record of all your comments. This may help you cover your bases legally and can help you respond consistently.

Whenever possible, try to keep a negative post up (except, of course, when it's inappropriate), and consider using positive replies to rectify the situation.

In some extreme cases you may need to delete a comment or remove a photo. Platforms such as Facebook allow the owner of the page to block visitors from adding their own posts to the 'wall'. This does not prevent people from commenting on existing posts.

## **DEALING WITH AN UNTRUE STATEMENT**

If someone has published defamatory statements on a social media site, you can ask the site administrator to remove them.

You can also try writing to the administrators of a search engine and ask for links to the site to be removed.

NetSafe has more information about dealing with malicious online content.

## **LET YOUR COMMUNITY KNOW THE COMMUNICATION PRINCIPLES OF THE HARMFUL DIGITAL COMMUNICATIONS ACT 2015**

Advising someone (offline) that they are acting in breach of the law may be enough to get them to take down their comment.

## **DON'T SUFFER ALONE**

Call NZSTA for advice or share the problem with a colleague to get an outside perspective.

## **PRINCIPLES OF THE HARMFUL DIGITAL COMMUNICATIONS ACT 2015**

1. A digital communication should not disclose sensitive personal facts about an individual.
2. A digital communication should not be threatening, intimidating, or menacing.
3. A digital communication should not be grossly offensive to a reasonable person in the position of the affected individual.
4. A digital communication should not be indecent or obscene.
5. A digital communication should not be used to harass an individual.
6. A digital communication should not make a false allegation.
7. A digital communication should not contain a matter that is published in breach of confidence.
8. A digital communication should not incite or encourage anyone to send a message to an individual for the purpose of causing harm to the individual.
9. A digital communication should not incite or encourage an individual to commit suicide.
10. A digital communication should not denigrate an individual by reason of his or her colour, race, ethnic or national origins, religion, gender, sexual orientation, or disability.

## **THESE WEBSITES HAVE USEFUL ADVICE AND INFORMATION FOR USING SOCIAL MEDIA AND MANAGING DIFFICULT RESPONSES**

Connected Learning Advisory Te Ara Whītki

NetSafe

Harmful Digital Communications Act 2015

## **REFERENCES**

### **Tim Dowling**

Dealing with trolls: a guide

<http://www.theguardian.com/media/2012/jun/12/how-to-deal-with-trolls>

### **Webroot**

You can't win an argument with a troll

<http://www.webroot.com/nz/en/home/resources/tips/pc-security/you-cant-win-an-argument-with-a-troll>

### **Whitson Gordon**

How to Stop Caring About Trolls and Get On With Your Life

<http://lifehacker.com/5854053/how-to-stop-caring-about-trolls-and-get-on-with-your-life>

### **John Brandon**

5 ways to handle comment trolls on social media

<http://www.cio.com/article/2935933/online-reputation-management/5-ways-to-handle-comment-trolls-on-social-media.html>