MINISTRY OF EDUCATION
TE TĀHUHU O TE MĀTAURANGA

A School's Guide for
Managing negative social media

This guide outlines steps you can use to manage negative comments, some things to keep in mind and resources for your further reading.

Many schools use social media to communicate and engage with their school and wider community.

The 'down side' of social media is the potential for negative incidents or comments about your school or a school official. Negative issues are the exception rather than the rule, but they can get a lot of publicity.

Negative Facebook campaigns and comments from online 'trolls' can be distressing for staff, students and parents.

Have you thought about what may be said and how you will respond?

Setting up social media procedure and policy

It's important that your Board of Trustees has a social media procedure and policy that includes privacy and acceptable use guidelines. This provides staff, students, parents and the school community with clear direction when participating in your school's online community.

Your policy could include things like: protecting privacy, honesty, respecting laws, and outcomes and consequences. It should also have delegations and procedures stating who is responsible for monitoring, moderating and responding to posts, and under what circumstances.

The communication principles of the Harmful Digital Communications Act 2015 will be helpful in forming your procedures, and NetSafe has a HDC Act Toolkit that is helpful for educators and schools (see the references below).

Check your social media procedures with your legal advisor and share them with your school community.

Do they align with your school's ICT/Cybersafety policy and media procedure?

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 on your school's social media accounts. Timeliness is key, and you should aim to respond to any feedback as quickly as possible.

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' to encourage parents to visit the school when issues arise, and make them feel they are able to share any concerns face-to-face.

Social media provides an easy and instant means for people to share their views openly online. Respond to any request for a meeting as soon as possible, so that the concern doesn't have time to grow and boil over into public online comments.

Map out a response plan

Create a process for managing 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 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.

Monitor comments

It's critical that you stay on top of your accounts by closely monitoring your social media. Social media is public and operates 24/7. Unattended negative comment can spread quickly if not addressed. Check your accounts at least once daily, and, if possible, over the weekend.

It is a good idea to set your social media accounts to automatically notify you by email when there are new comments or responses.

Identify the 'type' of comment

Most comments will not be extreme or inappropriate. It is important that you understand what kind of comment you're dealing with before you respond to it – maybe it just needs some clarification.

Negative comments can be legitimate constructive criticism, but occasionally it could be a "troll" looking for a public forum for an argument. It's important to know the difference and respond accordingly – not everyone who disagrees with you is a troll.

Dealing with negative comments

Unless it breaches your terms of use for social media, try to keep negative posts or comments up.

You can take control by responding to the comment in a helpful and genuine manner. Ensuring that the person feels listened to will go a long way towards diffusing the situation.

It's a good idea to respond publicly, but move it to a private conversation by contacting the person directly. This gives you transparency, but will also help you provide a solution in greater detail, or enable you ask for sensitive information.

Dealing with trolls

There is a lot of advice for dealing with trolls in the references below. The experts say not to 'feed' the trolls – your attention and possible anger is what they want. You can never win an argument with a troll. Others suggest, however, that ignoring the troll gives them the power to silence you. Some suggests not replying to the troll's comment, but addressing the problem with the online 'audience'. But don't expand 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 social media policy. Neither is clicking the 'report abuse' button and reporting offensive or abusive material to external site moderators. Facebook and Twitter have policies against bullying and making threats.

Your reaction is your choice but consider the potential outcomes and consequences. Whatever you decide, don't engage at the troll's level – you risk looking as unbalanced as they are. If the troll is attacking an employee, you can hide or delete the comment. Any reply you make may breach your employer responsibilities. Talk to NZSTA for advice first.

Dealing with an untrue statement

If someone has published defamatory statements online you can ask the site administrators to remove them.

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

NetSafe has more information about dealing with malicious online content.

Record 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.

Don't suffer alone

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

Visit **www.NZSTA.org.nz**
Phone **0800 782 435**

Principles of the Harmful Digital Communications Act 2015

A digital communication should:

1. Not disclose sensitive personal facts about an individual.

2. Not be threatening, intimidating, or menacing.

3. Not be grossly offensive to a reasonable person in the position of the affected individual.

4. Not be indecent or obscene.

5. Not be used to harass an individual.

6. Not make a false allegation.

7. Not contain a matter that is published in breach of confidence.

8. Not incite or encourage anyone to send a message to an individual for the purpose of causing harm to the individual.

9. Not incite or encourage an individual to commit suicide.

10. Not denigrate an individual by reason of his or her colour, race, ethnic or national origins, religion, gender, sexual orientation, or disability.

Helpful websites

Useful advice and information for using social media and managing difficult responses

Connected Learning Advisory Te Ara Whītki

http://elearning.tki.org.nz/Technologies/Technical-support-and-procurement/CLA-resources?fbclid=IwAR2NZgBTppqSt4q9E3mjri34FczZ4So4rXYSixLKx7C4ZL9XBxgYBIpIPi0

Harmful Digital Communications Act 2015

https://www.justice.govt.nz/justice-sector-policy/key-initiatives/harmful-digital-communications/key-parts-of-the-act/

NetSafehttps://www.netsafe.org.nz/hdc-act/

References

The Complete Guide to Understanding and Dealing with Online Trolls
Better Humans
https://betterhumans.coach.me/the-complete-guide-to-understanding-and-dealing-with-online-trolls-4a606ae25c2c

How to deal with trolls on social media
Hootsuite
https://blog.hootsuite.com/how-to-deal-with-trolls-on-social-media/

Forbes – John Rampton
10 tips for dealing with trolls
https://www.forbes.com/sites/johnrampton/2015/04/09/10-tips-to-dealing-with-trolls/#1e28861f54f4

Tim Dowling – Dealing with trolls: a guide
http://www.theguardian.com/media/2012/jun/12/how-to-deal-with-trolls

This guide was developed by:

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.