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We the Media

Social Media Policy for State Boards

The World War II-era posters asserting that “Loose Lips Sink Ships” reminded the public that careless talk could undermine the war effort. Fast forward to today, with more people, including public officials, taking to social media to opine on any number of subjects, an apt advertisement might read, “Loose Tweets Sink Fleets.”

Perhaps it was a loose tweet that prompted a state board executive director to write me asking for help navigating the dos and don'ts. She wanted to steer board members toward responsible use of social media to communicate and advance the board's goals while avoiding the pitfalls of mixing the personal with the professional.

Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn are vital tools for communicating the work of the board and keeping the public informed. But smart use is essential. Boards should set clear expectations and parameters for member conduct. What goes into such a policy? Here are some ideas to get boards started.

Review Existing Policy. At least 24 state boards have guidelines for how their members should interact with the news media. Every state has a code of ethics and an open-meeting law. These policies are meant to keep members on message and protect them from making a public comment that could reflect poorly on the board or land themselves in hot water. Review these policies for language you can incorporate in your social media policy and make sure the final language does not conflict.

Know Your First Amendment Boundaries. State board members, whether elected or appointed, are public officials. But they have a right to express opinions, just as private citizens do. In a *Standard* column she wrote as

NCOSEA president, Iowa state attorney Nicole Proesch cites a U.S. Supreme Court ruling that protects teachers' First Amendment rights in commenting on matters of public interest in connection with the operation of their school. She writes that “state board members have the same right to speak as private citizens on matters of public concern if they identify that they are doing so in a private capacity and not as a board member.” She rightfully points out, however, that personal speech may disrupt or derail the work of the state board. Discuss and articulate boundaries and expectations for members' expression of personal opinions publicly.

Define the Rules of Engagement.

There can be a fine line between healthy debate and incendiary reaction. Once words are out there, you can't really get them back. Much as *Robert's Rules* keeps order at the board table, rules of online decorum can help members avoid knee-jerk posts.

Consider Privacy, Technology, and

Copyright. Quick quiz: Did you send your last tweet from your smartphone? Is it a personal device or government issued? Likewise, that picture you just shared with your Facebook friends: Are you sure you shared it just with your friends? Did you give proper credit? These are all things to be addressed in a social media policy.

Social media can benefit state boards and individual members. Board members should discuss the potential dangers of its use, outline expectations for lawful and respectful conduct, and collectively commit to engaging responsibly. ■