Social media provides Alabama Extension professionals with a variety of innovative and powerful tools to interact with clients and the general public. These tools can be used to provide information and education, to develop, relationships and to foster conversations. Their potential continues to expand as new social media tools are developed. Many Alabama Extension professionals are already using social media for personal and professional purposes.

These guidelines provide direction in using social media for professional purposes and ensure the portrayal of a consistent and positive brand for Alabama Extension in social media outlets.

For the purposes of these guidelines, the term “social media” is defined as any online medium that provides for user interaction, discussion, and comments (such as social networks, blogging, microblogging, photo, and video sharing applications).

General Guidance

(1) All Extension employees using social media should maintain a clear distinction between personal and professional uses. Understand that some of your social media participants will recognize you as an employee of the Alabama Cooperative Extension System.

- When your social media activity is observable by clients, stakeholders, and/or other professional audiences, your behavior should represent you well and reflect positively on Extension.

- When you are on a personal site, speak in the first person and clearly state that you are speaking for yourself and not for Extension.

- In all instances, you should be factual and correct.

(2) Extension employees using social media for professional purposes should communicate appropriately according to the standards of the social media environment that they are participating in. Social media environments tend to be communities of peers. Your credibility in these communities will be affected by your ability to communicate authentically and respectfully as a community member. Alabama Extension’s credibility in the social media world, just as in the real world, depends upon your credibility.

(3) For Extension employees using social media for professional purposes, submit your site (blog, Facebook page, Twitter handle, etc.) to the Alabama Extension social media directory. The directory will allow you to easily identify colleagues that you may wish to follow or whose blog or Facebook page to which you may want to subscribe.

(4) Exercise caution when communicating with youth online. It is important that Alabama Extension employees maintain professionalism when communicating with youth online, just as they would in the offline world.

- Do not use the names of 4-H members or other youth when posting photos (e.g., no tagging).

- Do not interact with 4-H members or youth involved in Extension programs on their personal social media sites.

- Promote 4-H events, activities, member interaction, etc., only on pages and sites that follow Alabama Extension’s guidelines for content and administration.

- Apply these practices in a common sense manner. They should not be interpreted so strictly as to interfere with personal interactions with family members and personal friends.

(5) All social media networks managed by Extension including but not limited to sites or pages related to program content, county Extension offices, 4-H clubs, and Master Gardener groups should have at least two administrators.

- In the case of county Extension offices, at least one of these administrators must be the county coordinator.

- In the case of 4-H clubs, at least one of the administrators must be a full-time Extension agent (regional 4-H agent, county 4-H agent, or county Extension coordinator).
• In the case of 4-H clubs, if individuals other than Extension professionals are administrators, they must be Alabama 4-H volunteers who have successfully completed the 4-H Volunteer Screening process and are certified Alabama 4-H volunteers.

• In the case of Master Gardeners, at least one of the administrators must be a full-time Extension employee (regional home grounds agent or county Extension coordinator).

(6) On Facebook, Extension program teams, county Extension offices, and others create their presence as organization pages rather than as groups or personal profiles.

(7) Social media pages must feature the appropriate Extension logo. These can be found at www.aces.edu/go/432.

(8) Administrators should evaluate content to be posted as it relates to the personal sensibilities of their audiences. When in doubt, visit with your supervisor and discuss appropriate boundaries.

(9) Administrators must not post or allow the posting of content that includes the following:
  • Language, images, or videos that may be considered profane, obscene, vulgar, or lewd by prevailing community standards.
  • Language that is derogatory or discriminatory, including comments about gender, age, race, sexual orientation, or religious affiliation, or that is libelous or slanderous.
  • Any advertisements for commercial products.
  • Spam.

(10) Administrators must not post or allow the posting of content that is not their property or the property of Alabama Extension. Any material that is copyrighted by another individual or organization should not be posted.

(11) Administrators must not collect personal information, such as Social Security numbers and addresses, from social media users.

(12) Collegiality on social media is essential in maintaining a positive and productive atmosphere among Alabama Extension professionals. It fosters mutual understanding, respect, and trust that best serve the interests of the ACES community as a whole and successfully promote our mission. Every ACES professional should appreciate opposing viewpoints and individual diversity of their fellow Extension professionals.

This document was based on similar publications by Oregon State Extension, Texas Agri-Life Extension and Auburn University at Montgomery. Alabama 4-H’s Social Media Etiquette for Volunteers was a primary source for guidelines relating to youth. The Alabama A&M Faculty Handbook also provided valuable guidance for the guidelines on collegiality.

How Private is Private?

Privacy on Social Media

• Evaluate your account settings for all of your social media platforms.

• Choose strong privacy settings that restrict wide access to your information.

• Thoughtfully consider information that you include on social media platforms that will be visible to all.

When Privacy Settings Are Not Enough

• Understand that tight and secure privacy settings do not offer complete protection.

Example: You and Mary are longtime friends. You are also friends on Facebook. You have set your Facebook privacy settings very tightly. Mary can easily take a screenshot of a photo that you post or a comment you make and then post it anywhere.

Understand That You Are a Public Official in the Eyes of the Media

• As a government employee paid by taxpayer dollars, you can be considered a public official by the media.

From the Digital Media Law Project:

The “public officials” category includes politicians and high-ranking governmental figures, but also extends to government employees who have, or appear to the public to have, substantial responsibility for or control over the conduct of government affairs. Courts have interpreted these criteria broadly, extending the public figure classification to civil servants far down the government hierarchy. For example, the supervisor of a county recreational ski center was held to be a “public official” for purposes of defamation law. Some courts have even extended the protection to all individuals engaged in matters of public health, such as hospital staff, given the importance of health issues for the general public. http://www.dmlp.org/legal-guide/proving-fault-actual-malice-and-negligence
• Why being a public official matters.

It means the media and others can comment on your behavior, actions, and social media posts among other things. You might consider it libelous or defamatory if this were to happen to you, but you have little to no recourse to stop them. As a public official, you would have to prove the media acted with “actual malice,” the legal standard of defamation.

Example: It comes to the attention of the media via social media posts that you hosted a party where alcohol was served. Posted photos show that the party became rather raucous. You would have no ability to stop them from pursuing or publishing a story about this.