

Let's Write Some Rules For Social Media

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Social media and digital imagery was recently in the (fire) news, with more sordid stories involving Twitter and Facebook and medics behaving badly in New York City.

Rather than recap what's covered well elsewhere, let's take a stab at some social media guidelines for ourselves. Let's pretend we're preparing a presentation. Mr. Blogger has been, say, asked to appear before a group of firefighters or medics, to offer some tips on "how to do right and not wrong by social media." To speak from experience, or at least heat the room with some hot air.

We'll presume a couple things. First, that our audience knows what social media (and digital imagery) is and how it's used. Second, that our readers are using social media themselves, personally or professional or both.

Our task? Create a list of bullet points, of advice for individual responders. What should you think about before, during, and after clicking send/post. Here we go...

1. Observe the rules and regulations of your agency. If there's a policy about social media and/or digital imagery, it should be observed. This one's the "duh" rule.

It applies on-duty, of course. But there may some regulations regarding off-duty conduct with social media. Learn the rules that you're supposed to follow. Ignorance of SOPs is no excuse!

2. Don't violate HIPAA rules for patient privacy, by revealing personal or identifying information about patients you or your agency has treated. Either by text narratives or digital images.

We might need to read/study HIPAA here, to learn more. Pictures of someone's face, their name, their treatment information, those are obvious. But there are probably other criteria to cite.

What about off-duty, you ask? You can't go wrong by not doing it. But we need a better mind than mine to tease out the wiggle room, if there is any.

3. Don't post or transmit anything that you wouldn't be comfortable with the rest of the world seeing, including your Chief, your Captain or Shift Supervisor, your spouse, your parents, your children, your minister, your local news editor, and your local District Attorney.

The one's the basic umbrella guideline. We'll see variations of it below....

[Plus the future-tense variation. Don't post or transmit anything you wouldn't be comfortable with FUTURE versions of those people seeing. Added April 5. See reader comments below.]

4. If you're off-duty and using social media unofficially, BUT you still identify yourself as a responder or a member of an agency, your actions may reflect upon the organization. Sure, you think you're only speaking for yourself, but others outside your circles may think otherwise.

This has happened to me, and on repeated occasions. John Q. Public finds my unofficial web page about the Raleigh Fire Department. They have a question about stations and coverage as related to their insurance. I direct their query to RFD.

We might add another rule in here, "If you're contacted by someone via social media, about official business, converse as if you'd answered the station telephone. Courteous, formal, and probably referring them to your agency's administration."

5. If you're off-duty, and NOT identified as a responder or a member of some department, your social media actions can STILL reflect upon the organization. Particularly if they depict "bad" behavior. We see this happen all the time. The job title precedes the headline of

"arrested" or "under investigation."

But it also works when "good things" happen. A recent WRAL story about a rescued eagle identified the good seminarian as a firefighter. And they named his department.

This "identification by association" applies to other public servants, and not just responders. Teachers are always running into issues with this one.

6. Refrain from posting personal information about responder injuries or deaths, even within your own private social media circles, immediately after an incident.

This helps prevent family members from learning of this through social media connections. Instead, wait to "talk about it" on social media until information is released publically.

We've all seen this? Someone in the know starts with "prayers for the _____ family." Or with outright individuals named. This is a commendable show of support... unless it's the first time a family member hears the news. We'd probably all prefer official notifications in these instances.

7. Don't be punitive. Digital imagery and social media makes it super-easy to share "moments in time." And in the dynamic world of a fire or accident scene, a moment in time can show the wrong usage of a tool for brief period, the helmet set aside for a short spell, the action that looks odd out of context, and so forth.

Use good judgment when judging others based on "moments in time" information.(We might have a leg up locally on this one, through the years of work by Lee and Legeros. And especially in/around Raleigh. A saturation of photo coverage has probably helped supervisors and chief officers take "moments in time" in stride.)

8. Don't take things so personally, and be ready to apologize to people who feel bad about something you did. Social media channels allow for instant/quick/spur of moment comments and conversation. They are also missing facial and verbal and body cues. Miscues and miscommunication should be expected.

Secondary rule with this might be something like "Be aware of how quickly things happen. How quickly the message is sent and read. How fast a posted photo is viewed by others, and then discussed. Etc."

Should we insert some case studies or personal testimonies here? Readers can perhaps offer examples of "being bit."

9. Become a better typist AND writer. Or, if you prefer, don't look "stupid." Easiest fix for this is proofing what you write, before you click send. Read it over once. Use spell check.

Paste your text from the blog page into Microsoft Word, for more even better editing capabilities. Read the thing aloud for maximum effect. Not just mumbling. Stand up, full voice, and read what you wrote out loud. You'll be amazed at what your writing really sounds like.

Corollary here is the reverse. Cut some slack for those who write less good or type less better than yourself. Don't be the grammar police. Particularly in light of more aggressive auto-correct features that we're seeing, notably on mobile phones. Plus voice transcription systems that are increasingly common.

10. Don't document or transmit things that make you, your peers, or your agency look bad. How's that for broad? And it's covered by the above points as well. Too simple? Too much/little wiggle room? Probably.

What do you think, does that cover the bases? Do they need to be broken into rules versus guidelines?

More importantly, what's missing?

The first and last points are probably the best. The gist of them being:

- Obey policies.
- Don't break HIPAA laws.
- Don't do anything you don't want broadcast.
- Don't make (yourself or) others look bad.

And there you have it. Your thoughts?

Name: (real name preferred)

E-mail: (optional)

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To prevent spam we require you to answer this silly question

What are the FIRST TWO LETTERS of the word 'fire'?

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Notify: Yes, send me email when someone replies.

Hide email: Yes, hide my email address.

Small print: All html tags except and <i> will be removed from your comment. You can make links by just typing the url or mail-address.