Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council

Social Media Guidelines

April 2021

About these Guidelines

The following guidelines are created for staff who represent the Gulf Council on social media. Social media is a function of the communications staff, thus all communications that occur on Gulf Council social media accounts should be representative of the Council and should reflect the unified voice and supporting rationale that is conveyed by the Council as a whole. Social media posts and comments should not reflect personal opinions of staff or individual Council members.

Starting Accounts

Social media is a part of the Council's broader communication strategy and should be used to push content to constituents in an effort to inform and engage them in the Council process. Social media platforms should be selected strategically. The following considerations should be made before a new account is started:

- Who is the primary user of this platform? Is the intended audience appropriate?
- What is the anticipated return on investment for this platform?
- Is content creation burdensome?
- Do you have the resources and commitment necessary to run the account well?

Once you've determined that using another social media platform is appropriate, contact leadership staff for approval.

Posting Content

Social media is often a first opportunity to engage constituents. Its broad reach, relatively unintimidating format, and increasing popularity allows for primary contact to stakeholders who might not otherwise engage in the Council process. With this in mind, content should be as simple and engaging as possible. Posts should contain an appropriate photo or related visually appealing content. Examples of appropriate posts include:

- Positive educational content (Fish Fact Friday, Marine Map Monday)
- Meeting notices (including links to meeting materials or webinar registrations)
- Informational content (meeting summaries, meeting previews, regulatory changes, fishing season notifications, blog articles, and solicitations for public comment)

Photo Practices

Use of photographic content to engage social media users is a cornerstone of social media success. Any photographs used should be property of the Gulf Council, open source, or posted with the owner's permission. Appropriate photo credits should be given. They can be given in the comment section if adding photo credit in the original post would detract from the message. When possible, photos with smiling faces are more engaging than photos without human subjects. However, staff should avoid

attaching a person's image to a potentially controversial topic. In such cases, photos of fish in situ are more appropriate.

Think Before You Post

Things can go viral very quickly. It's important that all content and photographs are accurate before posting. Credibility can easily be lost, and mistakes can reflect poorly on the organization as a whole. Always double check yourself and never hesitate to ask other communications staff or technical staff to review content before it goes live. It is also important to be sensitive to the surrounding atmosphere. If you schedule posts in advance or simply have content to push, ensure that there are not any other news issues occurring that deserve deferred posting from the Gulf Council. For example, on the day of a national tragedy, it would be insensitive to post "Happy Fish Fact Friday".

Deleting posts

Deleting a post after it has been published is not usually an option. If a mistake is posted, there is a high likelihood that someone will screenshot and use it against the agency. Instead, there is usually a way to gracefully apologize for the mistake. If you are considering deleting a post, contact the Public Information Officer for approval and guidance on how to do so. If it is determined that deleting a post is most appropriate, then a record, including a screenshot and rationale for deletion, should be kept.

Monitoring Accounts

Social media accounts should be monitored regularly. The nature of interaction on social media is more immediate than that of traditional forms of communication. When posting content, staff should recognize the need to monitor responses and should make an effort to reply to comments as soon as practicable. However, staff should also be mindful of personal time and is expected to put social media responsibilities aside, within reason, when not at work. Responding to social media is often a quick endeavor, but staff is not expected to do so at all hours of the night and weekends.

Handling Negativity

As a regulatory agency, we can expect that constituents will have negative reactions to some of our content. Users who engage on our social media platforms can often be individuals with whom we haven't developed relationships. It's important to remember that even these negative reactions provide a learning opportunity. Staff engaging with negative commenters should remain factual and courteous in all exchanges.

Responding to Negative Comments

Staff will be expected to use personal judgement when determining whether to respond, and how to respond, to negative comments. If there is an opportunity to provide information that contradicts negativity or false information, staff can present the facts in a polite, courteous manner. In some cases, it's better to ignore than it is to engage with a negative commenter. If the negative comment does not receive recognition from other constituents, staff has discretion to decide whether or not to

respond. The following is a list of the types of negative comments that may require further intervention:

- Comments that contain direct personal attacks or threats – These comments should be hidden or deleted. Staff should also directly respond to such comments explaining why the comment was removed.
- Comments that contain blatantly false information/accusations – The comments may remain at the discretion of staff, but truthful information contradicting the misinformation should be posted.
- Comments that contain profanity – These comments should be deleted and the commenter should be reminded that the Council's social media space should remain 'family friendly.'

Documenting Negative Comments

If a comment contains any of the violations above, and staff determines that it should be deleted, the comment should first be documented (screenshotted) and saved, along with a brief explanation of the incident.

Banning Users

If a user becomes abusive, forms a pattern of negative behavior, or egregiously attacks the Council or its staff, it may become necessary to ban the user. In such a case, Council staff should document each incident. When possible, staff should give warning and allow opportunities for the user to correct their behavior. However, a user can be banned immediately if the interaction is negative enough to earn immediate repercussions. Regardless, the comments and responses should be documented. If a user wants to be reinstated after being banned, they can contact the Public Information Officer and ask for permission to be reinstated 90 days after being banned.

Record Keeping

Comments on social media do not constitute a public record. The social media profiles should make this clear whenever possible. At this point, there are no federal standards or policies in place for social media/web 2.0 retention practices performed by the Councils. Until such a time, we will keep our own records (as mentioned above) in instances when we delete our own posts, when we delete posts from commenters, and/or when we ban users.

Analytics

Quarterly analytics for each social media platform will be kept and reported to the Outreach and Education Technical Committee and the Council on an annual basis.