UNIVERSITY of FLORIDA
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Maintaining Professionalism on Facebook: Tips for Extension Agents[1]

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Overview

Facebook has revolutionized the world in which we communicate. In just a few mouse clicks, you can access personal information, pictures, recent conversations, and much more about your Facebook "friends." With these things in mind, it is important to carefully consider the implications of becoming a Facebook friend.

Facebook is a social media tool that is intended to "connect people with friends and others who work, study and live around them" (Facebook.com, 2010). Originally launched in February 2004, Facebook currently has more than 500 million active users. It has become a true online community as users spend more than 700 billion minutes a month accessing the site (Facebook.com, 2010). A typical Facebook user has the following basic elements available on his or her Facebook page:

- Profile Picture – This picture is selected by you and is the picture all of your Facebook friends see when they search for you. This picture can be changed as frequently as you deem necessary.

- Basic Information – This information contains your name, birthday, place of employment, education, hometown, spouse, and various other optional information.

- Wall Posts – Your wall is basically the home page of your site. Typically, all your Facebook activity shows up on your wall. This activity includes—but is not limited to—information about when you post on another user's wall, post pictures, update your status, and receive a post from another friend.

- Photos – The photos tab is a place where you can upload images to Facebook. It is also important to note that you can be "tagged" in photos, meaning that someone else can upload a picture of you and tag you in it. The tagged photo will show up in your photos tab and on your wall. If it is a picture that you don't want identified to yourself, then you must "untag" yourself from the photo.

Professionalism

Due to the many personal elements of a Facebook page and the large number of Facebook users, it can be very difficult to have a page strictly for professional use. Once your friends know you are on Facebook, they will likely send a friend request. Furthermore, it can be difficult to monitor your wall and picture posts on a daily basis to ensure that only professional information is displayed. Many users find themselves managing their Facebook pages so that it can be both professional and personal.

However, it is recommended that if an Extension employee has a personal Facebook page, the personal page should be kept separate and distinct from any UF/IFAS Extension site or Facebook page. If you are a 4-H agent working with youth, you should not be "friends" with these youth on your

personal Facebook page. If you want an online presence on Facebook that is a reflection of your Extension work, create a professional Facebook page for yourself, a Facebook group, or a Facebook fan page.

It is easy to create a Facebook group page or a Facebook fan page for an Extension program, such as a 4-H club. With a Facebook group page, you can control the membership and who can access it. There are benefits to creating this type of Facebook group: (a) it is simple to organize and invite members to events, (b) it is a convenient way to share pictures from events, (c) it is an easy way to distribute information to group members, and (d) it allows members to share information and communicate, which may facilitate increased learning opportunities.

A Facebook fan page is meant for a broader audience. It can be viewed by anyone with a Facebook account. In addition, anyone can post a message to a fan page, whereas with a group page only members of the group can post messages. With a fan page, you lose a great deal of control with the content of the page. These pages are not recommended for 4-H clubs and activities as you need to be concerned with content, pictures, and discussions that youth could both see and participate in. Fan pages may be a good avenue for distributing information to generate interest for Extension programs targeted to adults.

If you are developing a professional Facebook page, a Facebook group, or a Facebook fan page, please remember that Facebook can be a professional tool, much like your business card, program website, or even your office or workspace. Here are some general tips for using Facebook so that it reflects both your personal and professional life in a positive light:

- **Choose your "friends" wisely.** This concept dates back to elementary school, and it is just as important in the social media realm as it is in daily life. It is best to err on the side of caution and avoid "friending" individuals that may post inappropriate comments on your wall or send you inappropriate group requests. As in school, you do not want to be seen hanging out with a "rough crowd" online. It could be detrimental to your professional life. Additionally, you should not accept friend requests from anyone you do not know. It may feel rude to deny or ignore a request from someone, especially if you have mutual friends, but you would most likely never tell strangers personal information or show them pictures of yourself or your family in real life, so it is best not to do it in the virtual world, either.

- **Post content with discernment.** Any content posted on Facebook should be considered public information. Only display on your profile or page what you would display on your desk (Sohn, 2007). Think about your coworkers, supervisors, clients, or even the university president walking by. Would you be comfortable with them seeing what is on your desk or hanging on your walls? The same would go for any Facebook page that you create that reflects your position with Extension.

- **Never use Facebook as an outlet for frustration.** It is easy to feel braver or more confident sitting behind your private computer screen, but once you click "post," that information leaves the privacy of your home or office and is available for others to view. If you find yourself angry or frustrated about a topic and your Facebook page is open, it is best to exit out of your account and cool down. You never want to post content that you will regret later.

- **Be cautious with the applications that you add to any professional Facebook page you create.** Would you post your daily horoscope on your door every day for everyone to read? If not, then you should not sign up for that application on your professional pages. If you create a Facebook group for your Extension program, be careful of the links that you share with group members. These links should be relevant, timely, and of interest (professionally) to members of the group (Sohn, 2007).

- **If you create it, you have to update it.** Remember that any new Facebook page you create is available for people to see. If you create a group page focusing on your Extension program, remember that you need to update it with fresh information, new pictures, and recent activity. If you do not update it frequently, visitors to your Facebook page will lose interest in the page, and you will lose an opportunity to share with people the great things you are doing!

- **Take advantage of Facebook as a networking tool.** Remember that your professional Facebook page is a chance to network with other Extension professionals. With that in mind, search for other Facebook group pages for programs like yours to learn about what other states are doing and to share information.

- **Spend time learning about privacy settings.** Privacy settings are essential to ensuring a positive Facebook experience. Facebook has implemented many privacy settings, from controlling the privacy of each element of your page to creating lists that help you organize your friends. Friend lists are a great tool to use; once friends

are assigned to a list, you can determine the amount of information on your page that the entire list is able to view. This feature gives you a good deal of flexibility when deciding what type of information your friends should be able to view.

Following are specific considerations if you are going to have a professional Facebook page for yourself:

- **Keep the "Info" section to a minimum.** On your professional Facebook page, it is completely acceptable to list your education and work. It is not recommended that you list your political and religious views, your sexual orientation, or your personal contact information (MacDonald, Sohn, & Ellis, 2010). Think about this section of your Facebook page as your resume—what you include in that, you can include in this section. This is a great place to list books that you may use or that are related to your job, and also other activities and interests you have that pertain to your job or program.

- **Err on the side of caution.** Remember to exercise caution when posting photos to your page, especially if you are working with youth. Please read the "Photos" section above for more guidelines on using images.

- **Be intentional.** Think of the comments you post on your wall and on the walls of others as professional communication. Have a reason for the comments you make. Again, would you be comfortable with your coworkers, clients, and supervisors reading what you have posted?

Legal Considerations

Facebook accounts are subject to different legal considerations depending upon whom they represent. The most common type of Facebook account is an individual account, but organizational accounts are gaining in popularity. This section addresses considerations for each type of account.

Individual Accounts

This is your personal account and is not intended to represent the University of Florida, UF/IFAS Extension, your county, or any of your programs. From a legal perspective, you can do what you wish with your personal Facebook page as long as you're within the boundaries of the law. If something is illegal to do in real life, then you shouldn't do it, talk about it, or post pictures of it online.

Organizational Accounts

The rules are different for organizational accounts. Here are a few things you need to think about:

- The University of Florida's Facebook page policy: The University of Florida's General Counsel has developed specific wording to be posted on any official UF Facebook page. You should follow the same policy unless a separate policy is developed for UF/IFAS Extension. To access the most current version of the policy, go to http://www.webadmin.ufl.edu/policies/social-media/facebook.html.

- First Amendment rights: As a government agency and agents, UF/IFAS Extension and its employees must uphold freedom of speech. It is illegal to delete offensive comments from a Facebook wall *unless there are clear and published rules about what is acceptable for posting on the wall. Such rules must apply equally to everyone.* The safest practice may be to disable the comments feature.

- Photos: Any individuals featured in photos posted on an organizational account need to sign a photo release. If you plan to post photos of your clientele, it is advisable to change the wording on your present photo release to reflect Facebook as a possible outlet where photos may be shared. An example would be to use the wording "including, but not limited to" in your photo release. It's not illegal to "tag" (identify individuals in a photo with a hyperlink to their Facebook pages) your clientele, but it is good practice *not* to tag youth to help protect their safety online.

- Online advice: If you plan to share answers to clientele questions online, you need to follow the same standards as you would when writing an EDIS publication.

- Copyright issues: The University of Florida, UF/IFAS Extension, and 4-H logos are copyright protected. It's likely that your county logo is protected as well. You must have written permission to use these logos online.

- Administrative approval: You must have the permission of the Senior Vice President for Agricultural Affairs or designee to create an official site. This may help to expand the resources available to protect you if a legal situation arises.

Summary

If used properly, Facebook can be an excellent tool to promote both yourself and your Extension program.

Adhering to a few guidelines will help you maintain a professional image. Just remember, you are a reflection of your organization—be aware of that before you become "friends" with Facebook!

References

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