



## **Digital Fundraising Playbook Series:**

### **Managing Negativity in Social Media**

## Introduction and Program Overview

Shelters, rescue groups and other animal welfare organizations recognize the value of social media marketing, not only for promoting adoptable pets but for digital fundraising, campaigns, storytelling and events. However, in a world where social media posts reach people with different locations, beliefs and backgrounds, negative comments and disagreements can be common. Not everyone will agree with everything that you have to say, which can sometimes lead to a crisis, panic or arguments in the comments. So, it's important to have a plan for how to handle this type of situation when it occurs, whether your social media accounts are run by staff, interns or volunteers.

It may be tricky to manage negative comments and conversations, but they do offer us a chance to address concerns, answer questions and be transparent. Will you always change the person's mind or change the tone of the conversation? No, but when people feel heard and acknowledged, they tend to be more loyal to your brand. Social media is a two-way street and a relationship-building tool.

## Program Composition

**Frequency:** Negative comments, mentions and tags can happen every day, so having a strategy to handle negativity will make it easier to interact with people and maintain control of the situation. You'll want to catch negative comments or arguments as quickly as possible to prevent them from escalating into a worse situation. Ideally, you'll have someone checking your various social platforms throughout the day, especially if your organization is launching a new or controversial program. If you do not have the bandwidth for multiple check-ins, try to establish at least one daily check-in at different times of the day.

**Necessary skills:** To manage negativity on social media, you must be able to put your personal opinions aside and respond only within the parameters of the official stance of your organization. You must be level-headed, focused and willing to walk away if you are unable to maintain the official position on issues. People will try to bait you on social media, but you must not take the bait by getting into a fight online. Always maintain the official tone and voice of your organization. Remember, you are representing the organization and you should not allow your personal opinions or views to interfere with the clarity of the organization's official position.

**Basic technology and tools:** Create a response document that includes answers to all of the most frequently asked questions about the organization, as well as official positions on any potentially controversial topics and questions. This document has multiple benefits:

- Increases the confidence and preparedness of whoever is answering negative comments or questions
- Ensures that an individual's responses are in the correct voice and tone of the organization
- Helps create consistency with responses if multiple people are responding to comments, both positive and negative

This response document should be ever-growing. As new questions or issues arise, potential responses should be added to the document, in case related questions pop up on social media. You can also add questions and answers to this document in anticipation of an event or program launch that you know will generate some questions or possible disagreement on social media. This will allow you to prep your comment moderators. [Trello](#) is a great place to keep and organize these responses. You can place them in categories for quick and easy searches (e.g., field, adoptions, foster, volunteer, clinic, news and media).

Accessibility is also important. Do your comment moderators have a way to answer comments and handle negative situations if they are away from their computers? Negative situations can arise at any time and sometimes the response cannot wait until the moderator is back in the office. Having appropriate mobile access is critical for managing a negative situation that arises abruptly.

**Basic steps in creating a positive social media presence:** Create clear written organizational guidelines for what is allowed in the comments and what is not. Some questions to answer:

- What are the grounds for comments being hidden vs. comments getting a response from the organization?
- What are the grounds for a person being banned and blocked from the page?
- Do you have a warning system — a statement in the comments section outlining what is tolerated and what is grounds for dismissal?
- Do you have a schedule of who will be monitoring comments and social media conversation throughout the day?
- Are there gaps in your social media presence and coverage?
- Do you have clear protocols regarding what staff should do when they notice negative comments (e.g., refrain from commenting but raise the issue with supervisors immediately)?

**Basic steps in sustaining a positive social media presence:** Ideally, strive to engage with all negative comments and answer all questions. Why? Negative comments on social media could harm or tarnish your organization's reputation.

Your followers want to hear from you, whether they agree or disagree with you. Addressing concerns or questions can provide clarity to someone who is perhaps misinformed or put out “social fires” before they turn into full-blown wildfires. In our busy world, many followers will be shocked and excited that you took the time to notice them and respond. You will be setting a positive example by not shying away from a difficult conversation or sensitive topic. Keeping on top of negative comments and conversations will ultimately allow you to maintain control over your social channels.

**Bonus tip:** In rare instances, your professional responses make no difference, and a persistent individual (known as a troll in social media circles) ratchets up the negativity to a level that is

unacceptable. For a lot of these individuals, their goal is to engage you, period. What's the solution? At some point, you must acknowledge that these individuals have taken enough of your time and take steps to remove them from the conversation.

While municipal shelters do not have the same type of authority to remove people from their social media channels permanently, they can hide comments (the person who posted can see the comment but no one else can), banish the person for a limited period of time or discontinue comments altogether on posts that are being trolled. If you work for a municipal shelter, contact colleagues who manage your municipality's social media to see what your rights and responsibilities are.

## Conclusion

Every organization experiences negativity on social media at some point. Managing that negativity as it happens in real time can prevent it from spiraling out of control, which then impacts the morale of everyone touched by the issue.

By creating a plan for anticipating questions and preparing answers in advance; developing a set of expectations around staff, volunteer, board and supporter behavior; and embodying those expectations in written protocols, you will be well on your way to ensuring that the relationships you build through social media are positive and productive.

## Resources

- This [article](#) from *Social Media Today* offers eight tips for managing negativity.
- This Grammarly [blog post](#) offers smart ways to handle negativity and continue to focus on building positive relationships.

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