**Establishing a Professional Social Media Presence in the Fire Service**

Social media provide you with the potential to engage in conversations and build relationships. Tools such as Twitter, Facebook, blogs and YouTube can create communities of interest, facilitate learning, develop dialog and reach new audiences. Social media also present a new way to create visibility and credibility for you, your fire department and the fire service in general.

The information below may help answer initial questions to give you the confidence to begin developing a professional and meaningful social media presence.

**Make the decision to get started.** If you’re new to social media, ease into it gradually. Choose one or two venues to start with, such as Facebook ([www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com)) and Twitter ([www.twitter.com](http://www.twitter.com)). Follow the site’s instructions for setting up an account and posting information.

**Follow the examples of others.** Twitter perhaps offers a broader audience. But you’ll likely generate more meaningful discussions on Facebook. If you are unsure of what to tweet, post or blog about, check to see what other organizations with similar interests are discussing. Take note of topics on other sites that generate positive reactions and discussions.

**Use your real name.** Avatars and logos should be chosen to reflect you and what you represent. When working with colleagues on a jointly administered page, sign your posts, even with just your first name, to add a friendly touch. If you’re concerned about privacy, use the privacy settings offered by the social media site to protect your personal information.

**Provide information of interest to your readers or followers.** Promote department fundraisers. Post photos of events. Talk about the impact of current weather on fire conditions. Offer fire prevention tips. Spread the word about your department’s educational efforts. In short, simply promote a positive image of the fire service. In addition, many news reporters and editors monitor social media for story leads. Thus, social media can be a way for you to build relationships with media professionals, as well.

**Maintain accuracy.** Make sure your posts are as complete as possible given the constraints of the medium. Consider the “who, what, when, where, why and how information” relating to your topic. For example, think of a tweet as a long newspaper headline that tells a story in 140 characters.

**Engage your audience.** Ask questions, invite intelligent discussion and offer useful information. Vary your posts to keep followers interested. Don’t be afraid to be a little creative and try something new and entertaining, but always use common sense and good taste.

**Participate often and consistently.** Set a schedule that you can maintain. At first, try tweeting twice a week and posting to Facebook once or twice a week until you establish a routine. Work up to posting on your social media accounts on a daily basis. Consider using services such as www.hootsuite.com to send automated messages.

**Join in other conversations.** Participate in the social media efforts of similar organizations. Follow their Twitter feeds, ‘Like’ items on their Facebook page, and post comments on their blogs and discussion forums.

**Keep the discussion going.** When someone posts a question, answer it promptly and publicly so others can see it. Maintain your social media accounts and monitor your feedback. Delete profane or inappropriate postings without comment.

**Remain upbeat and positive.** Be respectful and use a friendly tone; your audience is your friend. Avoid engaging in bipartisan political discussions and making controversial comments. Remember, your goal is to draw people in, not turn them off.

**Be professional**. While discussions may be informal, remember that you represent your department and the fire service. Keep in mind that all postings are public and can be viewed by anyone.

**Treat others as peers.** Most social media environments are communities of equals. Communicate authentically and respectfully as a member of the community.

**Respect copyright laws.** Remember, fair use and copyright laws limit the information you can share or post online, even for educational purposes. Do not use copyrighted text or images or the intellectual property of others. If you are unsure of an items source, don't post it.

**Respect privacy and safety.** Avoid posting photos and identifying information about others without their consent. Never share identifying information about children on public websites or social media.

**Send followers to your website.** Refer your audience to your department’s website if they have one, or sites such as the South Carolina State Firefighters’ Association (scfirefighters.org) or the South Carolina Fire Academy (www.scfa.state.sc.us) for more information. This can help you attract followers.

**Grow your audiences.** Your goal should be to steadily increase the number of followers and viewers. It takes time to attract an audience. Even if you only see a gradual increase at first, keep trying. Change your strategy a little if you’re unhappy with your results.

**If you’re active in social media, let others know!** Once you establish a social media presence, notify the Association so they can become one of your followers. If you happen upon a formula for social media that works well for you, share the secrets of your success with your colleagues so they can follow your example!

*(Adapted from a handout prepared by the Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service, May 2012.)*