



Boon or bother? Social media marketing and ethics

It seems everyone today uses some form of social media. It is an important part of many clients' lives, and many counselors have found ways to use it to market their practices. You only need to check the news, however, to be reminded that things can go south online faster than you can say Twitter.

So, how do counselors keep up with the times yet still remain ethical? The 2014 *ACA Code of Ethics* has several directives for counselors who choose to use social media. The following scenarios provide context to some of the issues that counselors face online.

Developing a social media policy

Sean is a member of a small group of counselors preparing to open a group practice, and he is excited to start marketing. He proposes that they set up a Facebook page and a Twitter account for the practice in addition to the website that all of the partners have helped to create.

When counselors think about using social media, they should consider several issues. The *ACA Code of Ethics* states that counselors should have a social media policy and include this information in their informed consent. This policy should cover what expectations clients can have if they interact with a counselor via social media, including the potential risks (especially to confidentiality) and benefits. This applies to counselors who engage in social media only for personal use and those who use it to market their practices.

Counselors who choose to have a professional presence on social media face additional considerations. Sean and the other counselors in his practice should discuss what they hope to gain from marketing their practice on social media. Twitter might be another way for potential clients to find out about

their practice. Perhaps Facebook will help in producing referrals from other professionals and give members of the practice more visibility within the profession. Or should social media promote the practice of counseling and allow members of the practice to participate in discussions about counseling online? These are all good goals, but each comes with its own ethical considerations. Therefore, before counselors set up a social media site, it is important to have clear goals in mind.

Perhaps the greatest concern social media raises is the risk to confidentiality. When a person "likes" a page on Facebook, "follows" a user on Twitter or uses another avenue to create connections, that information is visible to others. There is little confidentiality risk when nonclients such as other professionals, counseling students or members of the public follow a counselor's professional page. It can be problematic, however, when potential, current or former clients follow a counselor's page. A connection now exists between the two parties in the digital world, and because that information is not private, some level of confidentiality has been lost. This is a fact that clients may not realize.

In our scenario, Sean and the other counselors have a duty to educate clients and potential clients about their rights to confidentiality and about the risks and benefits of following counselors online.

Additionally, clients and potential clients who want to get in touch with a counselor should know how to do so securely, rather than through social media. Several sites include options to turn off the messaging option so that this unsecured option is not even available; counselors should consider this

when creating their social media pages. When developing a social media policy, counselors should include the appropriate way for clients and potential clients to contact them.

Online reviews and testimonials

Sarah has been using her own website, social media, a listing on the Psychology Today Therapy Directory and word of mouth to grow her practice over the past year. One of her clients, Matt, has met his treatment goals and is in the process of termination. Matt says he would love to give Sarah a positive review online to "help other people know it's OK to come to counseling."

Online reviews are a part of many businesses' marketing strategies, so counselors might want to make use of them to bolster their practices. However, the *ACA Code of Ethics* calls on counselors to adhere to the higher standards of the counseling profession in their advertising. The ethics code states that counselors do not solicit testimonials; if a client wants to give a testimonial, counselors should do their best to educate the client on the risks and benefits of doing so.

Some counselors choose not to use testimonials — even those that are volunteered by clients — because of concerns about client confidentiality and the uneven power dynamic that can exist in counseling relationships. Just because the *ACA Code of Ethics* does not prohibit something does not mean that it is always in the best interest of the client.

If Sarah decides to include testimonials on her sites, she should ensure that every client understands the risks (such as a loss of a certain level of confidentiality) and the benefits (as Matt states, it might help others). Ideally, Sarah will have included this information in her informed consent so that clients are aware of the

process beforehand. Sarah should also consider each client's presenting issue and treatment progress and should not accept the testimonial if she thinks it might be harmful to the client. Because Matt is a recent client entering the termination phase, it would not be advisable for Sarah to post a testimonial from him.

In a related issue, when clients "like" a business's page, some see this as a testimonial or an endorsement of the counselor's services. This is yet another example of why it is important for counselors to make decisions regarding their social media policies before setting up any accounts. Counselors should include this information in the informed consent process and have their social media policies stated clearly on any professional website and social media pages.

Sarah set up her social media pages primarily to market her practice. Therefore, it is important that she also consider advertising standards as addressed in the *ACA Code of Ethics*. The accuracy of how counselors market themselves is crucial. Counselors should clearly state their credentials, their licensure status and their areas of expertise. Counselors should not portray themselves in ways that may be misleading. This is especially important online, where there are few checks on the authenticity of information. A social media profile that features all the relevant information should help potential clients find the most qualified counselor to fit their needs. Counselors should also correct any inaccurate statements that others make on the counselor's social media pages.

Additionally, if counselors have other businesses in addition to their counseling practice, they should keep these businesses separate from their counseling page. They must not promote these additional businesses to the clients they serve. If counselors develop workshops and trainings as additional revenue streams, they must be accurate in advertising these through their social media.

Comments and posts

Hope has just started using social media as part of her business marketing strategy. In addition to running her private practice, Hope sometimes receives invitations to speak about counseling for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer

and questioning (LGBTQ) issues, which is her area of expertise. She posts a video clip of a recent presentation that she gave to her social media platforms with the goals of educating and informing the public and promoting her speaking services. Several of the comments in response to her video show a lack of understanding about LGBTQ issues. Hope replies to these comments, correcting the misinformation. The replies from the commenters turn ugly, with some even using offensive language and making demeaning statements about Hope personally. Hope is trying to decide what to do next.

When using social media for marketing, the way to reach the broadest audience possible is to leave the privacy settings open to the public. This means that many people with a wide variety of viewpoints might see what a counselor posts. But what starts as a good-faith attempt to educate the public can sometimes devolve into an unproductive conversation. Counselors may not be aware of when their professional roles and their personal feelings are being blended. This blurring of the lines between professional and personal can also be problematic when it comes to the content that counselors choose to share on their professional profiles.

Counselors must consider that when they use social media platforms to promote their counseling practice, their comments and posts fall under counseling activities and should therefore conform to the standards of the *ACA Code of Ethics*. In short, if you wouldn't say it to a client or another counselor in "real life," don't post it online. This is a simple guideline to help you decide what is acceptable to post on your professional page.

In this scenario, it would have been best if Hope had given careful consideration both to what she chose to post and the potential reactions that the post might attract. Although she might have found the video perfectly acceptable to post, it unfortunately drew some ugly comments. She would be advised not to continue engaging with the insulting commenters because such situations quickly can spiral out of control. It also seems unlikely that she will be able to change the commenters' minds.

Instead, Hope should consider whether to delete these comments and then decide

how to handle comments in the future. Some counseling professionals choose to not allow comments on their posts for exactly this reason. Others decide that the open dialogue encouraged by comments is important to the promotion of counseling. Regardless, counselors should give serious thought to how they want to handle comments when developing their social media policies.

Knowing the ins and outs of the social media platforms you have chosen is key to developing competency, which is required by the *ACA Code of Ethics*. If Hope continues to use social media accounts for her practice, she must develop this competency. This means she must be vigilant to any comments or requests posted on her pages. She should know the setting options each site offers so that she can maintain maximum control of her pages' posts and appearance.

It is also important for Hope to stay abreast of any changes that site providers make to their user agreements, privacy settings or user interfaces. Because developing competency is an ongoing process, Hope will need to do her research and consult with other professionals who follow the *ACA Code of Ethics*. Hope may also choose not to pursue a social media marketing strategy if she decides she is too busy or cannot develop the required competency.

Conclusion

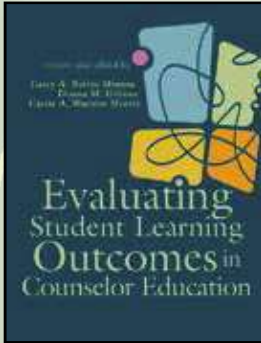
As with other technical innovations, from fax to email to computerized records, counselors can greatly benefit from social media platforms as long as they do so ethically. Although the 2014 *ACA Code of Ethics* is the first version to include a section specifically focused on social media and technology, one principle has been in place since the first iteration of the ethics code: The well-being of our clients must always be our first priority. If we keep this in mind as we develop policies and best practices around social media, we will continue to evolve as a profession in an ethical manner.

For additional information, consult the following standards in the 2014 *ACA Code of Ethics*:

- ❖ A.1.a. Primary Responsibility
- ❖ A.5.e. Personal Virtual Relationships with Current Clients

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- ❖ H.2.a. Informed Consent and Disclosure
- ❖ H.6.a. Virtual Professional Presence
- ❖ H.6.b. Social Media as Part of Informed Consent
- ❖ H.6.c. Client Virtual Presence
- ❖ H.6.d. Use of Public Social Media

Want more? Check out these following select resources:

- ❖ ACA ethics website: counseling.org/ethics
- ❖ "Legal and ethical issues surrounding the use of social media in counseling" by David M. Kaplan, Michelle E. Wade, John A. Conteh and Erin T. Martz, *Counseling and Human Development*, April 2011 (retrieved from [counseling.org/docs/ethics/legalethicalissuesurroundinguseofsocialmediaincounseling-\(2011\).pdf?sfvrsn=2](http://counseling.org/docs/ethics/legalethicalissuesurroundinguseofsocialmediaincounseling-(2011).pdf?sfvrsn=2))
- ❖ "Technology Tutor: The ethics of technology use" by Rob Reinhardt, *Counseling Today*, August 2014
- ❖ *The Paper Office for the Digital Age: Forms, Guidelines and Resources to Make Your Practice Work Ethically, Legally and Profitably*, fifth edition, by Edward L. Zuckerman and Keely Kolmes, The Guilford Press, 2016 ❖

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