



County of Ashe

Social Media Policy

Adopted Date:

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Policy Number: 10

General Statement

The County of Ashe is to be, above all else, a principled organization. In deed and in appearance, employees must conduct themselves in a manner that is appropriate for public servants. The County of Ashe (herein after referred to as the "County") recognizes the value of using social media as a way to communicate with stakeholders, media, its employees and the public at large. The County has an overriding interest and responsibility to protect the integrity of the information distributed on its social media sites and the content that is attributed to the County and its officials.

Due to the public nature of social media, the County has established a policy to guide employees in their use of such tools on both a professional and, as it may impact County business, personal level. This policy establishes the following: (1) the County's position on the use of social media as part of its communication and customer service strategy; (2) guidelines and expectations for development and use of social media services in an official capacity; and (3) expectations regarding an employee's personal use of social media.

Purpose

This Social Media Policy establishes guidelines for the creation and use of County social media sites as a means of conveying information to members of the public. County social media sites shall be utilized to disseminate information from the County about the County's mission, meetings, activities, services and current issues to members of the public. Such activities shall supplement, not replace, the County's standard methods of communication; the County's website (<http://www.ashecountygov.com>) will remain the County's primary and dominant online presence.

This policy also provides guidance in relation to employees' use of their personal social media accounts as it may influence or impact their ability to do their job. It is not the intent of this policy to restrict an employee's ability to create or maintain an online presence. It is, however, necessary

to provide guidelines in relation to personal social media use since such use has the potential to adversely impact County business.

Scope

This policy covers all individuals working with the County at any and all levels, including department heads, supervisors, officers, directors, employees, consultants, contractors, trainees, interns, remote workers, part-time or temporary employees, and volunteers. All related parties who participate in social media in an official capacity on behalf of the County must follow these guidelines. Given the ever-changing nature of social media tools, these guidelines will likely evolve over time. Therefore, all of the parties noted above must regularly review this policy to ensure compliance with the policy in its most current form.

In addition, all parties associated with the County must also remain aware of the applicability of this policy in relation to their own personal use of social media and adjust online behaviors accordingly.

Definitions

Social Media – various activities that integrate technology, social interaction and content creation. Through social media, individuals or groups can create, organize, edit or comment on, combine and share content. Social media uses many technologies and forms, including social-networking, blogs, wikis, photo-sharing, video-sharing, podcasts, social bookmarking, mash-ups, widgets, virtual worlds, and microblogs.

Social Media Sites – sites which allow individuals to create and disseminate content, using accessible, expandable and upgradable publishing technologies. Examples of social media sites include, but are not limited to, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube and LinkedIn.

County Social Media Sites – social media sites which are established and maintained by the County and over which it has control of all postings.

Post (or posting) – information, articles, pictures, videos or any other form of communication shared on a social media site.

Comment – a user submitted response to an administrator or moderator post.

Social Media Moderator – any employee or agent of the County who is assigned to post, share or monitor content distributed through the County's social media account(s).

Policy

The County will use social media and other emerging media platforms in specific ways to reach a broader audience and increase citizen engagement. Social media will not be the primary tool used for disseminating emergency information although it may be utilized in conjunction with other methods.

All social media sites utilized must be approved in advance by the County Manager and/or his/her designee as well as evaluated by County Information Technology personnel. The County reserves the right to terminate any County social media sites at any time without any notice. The County Manager may direct the deletion of a County social media account that is not being utilized or that is underutilized.

County social media sites shall clearly state that such sites are maintained by the County and that the sites and all interaction therein must comply with the County's Social Media Policy.

No communications made with the County through any County social media sites shall be deemed to constitute public comment or legal notice to the County or any of its agencies, officers, employees, agents or representatives where notice to the County is required by any Federal, State or local law, rule or regulation. Any such comment or notice shall be submitted to the County as ordinarily prescribed and not through County social media sites.

The County IT Department shall be contacted before a County social media account is setup. For existing social media accounts, an IT representative shall be added as an administrator.

The same standards, principles and guidelines that apply to County employees in the performance of their assigned duties apply to employee social media use. The County's online presence should convey the same professionalism and courtesy experienced during in-person interactions.

Acceptable Use

All use of social media networking sites by County employees and agents will comply with applicable State, federal and local laws, regulations and policies. This includes adherence to established laws and policies regarding copyright, records retention, North Carolina public records law, First Amendment rights, privacy laws and County acceptable use and information sensitivity and security policies. County social media sites shall comply with usage rules and regulations required by the site provider, including privacy policies.

All professional use of social media sites shall adhere to the following guidelines:

1. County-related communication through social media outlets should remain professional in nature and should always be conducted in accordance with the County's policies and expectations.
2. Any employee authorized to post items on any County-related social media site shall not express his / her own personal views or concerns through such postings.
3. When practical, content posted to the County's social media sites must contain hyperlinks directing users back to the County's official website for in-depth information, forms, documents or other online services necessary to conduct business with the County.
4. Employees and contractors should not conduct County business via a social media site. Clients or customers attempting to conduct business in such a manner should be politely redirected to the appropriate resource.
5. Creators, contributors and bloggers should not attempt to address matters outside of their area of expertise.
6. Posts should be meaningful and comments should be respectful. Humor is allowed insofar as it remains appropriate and furthers the purpose of the communication.
7. Spam or other offensive remarks are not permitted. Communication should not include any forms of profanity, obscenity or copyright violations.
8. When a response is appropriate, comments will be responded to in a timely manner. A respondent should always consider the appropriateness or necessity of any response and should avoid committing the County or any department therein to a particular course of action. The County reserves the right to turn off comments on social media posts.

9. Proprietary information, content and confidentiality will be respected. Do not share confidential or non-public information.
10. Disclaimers addressing third-party ads and inappropriate content should be clearly visible on official sites where applicable.

The County understands that the cornerstone of social media is interactivity, dialogue and the creation or building of a community. However, when using social media, an agency should not engage in any activity that may create the appearance of any sort of endorsement of a private entity or business. Links, posts and other information provided by other governmental entities and community resources may be shared as deemed appropriate for the purposes of informing County citizens.

Roles and Responsibilities

The Ashe County Information Technology (IT) department is responsible for managing the official County social media accounts. Department heads and / or the department head's designee may request that information be shared via social media using established IT protocols.

In the event that a Department Head or his / her designee needs direct access to a social media platform, such access may be established as deemed appropriate by the County Manager. Department Heads who manage their own social media accounts must provide the appropriate login information, including username(s) and password(s), to the IT department. IT personnel must also be included as an administrator on such accounts.

To open a departmental social media account, the department head must first inform the County Manager and the IT department of the desire to do so. In the instance of the request to utilize new technologies, the IT department will evaluate the safety and appropriateness of doing so. Furthermore, the IT department will assist in the establishment of such an account in order to ensure that the account follows the required protocol. Any potential account moderators will acknowledge the requirement to abide by the rules and guidelines stated in this policy.

County of Ashe Branding

County social media accounts will identify the account as representing the County of Ashe. In the case of a departmental account, the account will clearly identify the agency or department which the account supports. County social media accounts or departmental accounts may use the County logo or a department branding image. The profile image will properly represent the County or department and be easily recognizable.

Employees are not authorized to use County branding or logos on personal social media accounts.

Public Rules and Disclaimers

All social media accounts which represent the County or a department of the County must include a public rules and disclaimer statement. This information shall note the following:

1. Representatives of Ashe County Government communicate via this site. Consequently, any communication via this site, whether by a government official, County employee or the general public, is subject to the North Carolina Public Records Law and, as such, may be subject to monitoring and disclosure to third parties.

2. Ashe County values comments and questions from citizens and other interested parties. Such parties are encouraged to utilize online Feedback Forms where provided. Feedback that includes citizen complaints or comments must be maintained in accordance with the State retention schedule which governs such items.
3. Social media sites of the County and its respective departments are not intended to create a public forum and Ashe County reserves the right to remove comments entirely if they violate decency policies or are outside the topics or information provided on the social media site.

Comments will not be removed or censored because they are critical of a department, county official or any other aspect of County government or because a moderator personally disagrees with the opinion expressed therein. Moderators are, however, charged to delete inappropriate comments if they are vulgar, threatening, libelous or harassing. Furthermore, Ashe County reserves the right to delete comments that contain the following:

- a. Profane, obscene, violent or pornographic language and / or content;
- b. Content that promotes, fosters or perpetuates discrimination on the basis of race, creed, color, age, religion, gender, sex, gender identity or expression, marital status, status with regard to public assistance, national origin, physical or mental disability, pregnancy, medical conditions, sexual orientation, military or veteran's status, or any other basis protected by federal, state or local law;
- c. Sexual content or links to sexual content;
- d. Spam, advertising or links to other sites;
- e. Conduct or promotion of any illegal activity;
- f. Promotions for any particular services, products or political organizations;
- g. Information that may compromise the safety or security of the public or public systems or employees;
- h. Copyrighted or trademarked material;
- i. Personally identifiable information such as an address, phone number, Social Security number or other sensitive information;
- j. Content that does not pertain to County business;
- k. Content not related to the subject being discussed, including random or unintelligible comments;
- l. Defamatory or personal attacks;
- m. Conduct that is in violation of any federal, state or local law.

Users who repeatedly violate such rules may be blocked from commenting on County social media sites. In no event shall a user be blocked for disagreeing with or providing a contrasting opinion or point of view.

Public Records Law and Record Retention

County social media sites are subject to applicable North Carolina public records law. Any content maintained or received in a social media format, including communication posted by the County and communication received from citizens, is a public record and therefore subject to examination by requesting parties. The County is responsible for responding completely and accurately to any public records request for social media content.

Moderators who receive messages through the private message service offered by some social media sites should encourage users to contact the appropriate department or employee using a County-issued email address or website link. Any private messages received through a social media account must be treated as public records. As best practice, moderators or authorized staff members should reply using their County government email whenever possible.

Information posted on any of the County's social media accounts, regardless of the origin of the post, may be considered a record of public information as defined under North Carolina public records law. Therefore, there is no expectation of privacy with any social media posting on any County social media site.

All departments and relevant employees must assume responsibility for public records retention in relation to County-owned social media sites. Moderators and other employees may contact IT to design an appropriate retention system.

Use of Personal Social Media Accounts

The County recognizes that some employees may choose to express themselves in a public forum such as a social media account and respects the right of employees to do so. While the constitutional right to free speech applies to all, County employees must be cognizant of the fact that, by association with their employer, they present an image that reflects on the County as an organization. Therefore, County employees should adhere to the principle that they are responsible for maintaining the organization's credibility in all spaces, both online and in person. To this end, County employees are requested to adhere to the following guidelines:

- ◆ Avoid writing or posting anything that would embarrass the County or compromise one's ability to effectively perform professional duties.
- ◆ Assume that professional and personal interests will merge online regardless of an employee's care in separating them.
- ◆ Acknowledge that every exchange on social media is public, regardless of privacy tools and settings.
- ◆ Be aware of perceptions which may damage an employee's credibility and, therefore, his / her ability to do his or her job.
- ◆ Consider that one may be an observer of online content without actively participating.
- ◆ Avoid affiliations and memberships that may create real or apparent ethical conflicts.
- ◆ Advise supervisors if involved in a social media exchange which has the potential to impact the workplace.

County employees are prohibited from:

- ◆ Using their County email address to establish a personal social media site.
- ◆ Utilizing County of Ashe logos or branding on a personal social media site.
- ◆ Posting information which may violate County confidentiality policies or personally identify a County client or customer in any way.
- ◆ Conducting County business via a personal social media site or messaging service. County employees who are contacted by clients or customers via personal social media should direct the client or customer to an appropriate, official channel for County business.
- ◆ Participating in social media activities during the work day with the exception of brief use during break times.

- ◆ Posting information on a personal social media site which suggests or implies that the employee and the account content officially represent County positions and / or policies. This may include mentioning, referencing, tagging or otherwise incorporating the County in a personal social media post. Please note that this does not prohibit an employee from sharing an official County post in order to more widely disseminate public information or expressing personal opinions on a County issue of public concern.
- ◆ Creating or sharing information which may be considered discriminatory or harassing in nature.

Accountability

The County reserves the right to take appropriate action if an employee's social media activities – whether professional or personal – are unlawful or violate any of the County's policies. Staff should be aware that any use of social media website (whether or not they are accessed for work purposes) may be monitored as part of the public forum. Employees who violate this policy may be subject to disciplinary action, up to and including dismissal.