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Managing an online community: troll patrol

Your digital platforms are not self-sufficient; these two-way communication channels require careful management. Sharing and publishing information is step one. Responding to comments and managing decorum is step two.

How you build it will determine how you manage it

Successful online community management is the result of a few key factors, starting with building a solid purpose or cohesive reason for people to gather and dialogue in your social media in the first place. Define your purpose clearly. Having a target can be much better than hosting a general forum that invites random comments like those in newspaper stories that change day by day or minute by minute. If you inherit an online community to manage, consider reforming it by building in a key purpose. This can be an important strategy for taming something that can often be like the wild, wild west.

At the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW), I manage Facebook, several Twitter and Instagram accounts as well as YouTube, LinkedIn and Snapchat. We try to keep things as simple as possible to keep things positive and on-track.

Here's how I built a sense of purpose for ODFW's social media

In almost all cases, a single account is better than managing multiple accounts. If there are multiple accounts in schools and districts, there are also, usually, multiple managers. For example, school administrators will manage the school account, while coaches or parent volunteers will manage team accounts.

Multiple accounts can make things complicated. But at ODFW, we serve a variety of constituents with many different interests. Some are interested in hunting, some in fishing, and some in wildlife viewing. So, I created several different Instagram and Twitter accounts to inform and engage with people who have differing interests.

I built a sense of purpose into each account, creating content related to that purpose. For instance, our Marine Instagram account focuses only on ocean research (@odfwmarine). This makes managing the comments easier, as they need to relate to ocean research. Off-topic commenters are referred to our main account. This allows our main account to focus mostly on hunting and fishing news and information while having the ability to amplify our other accounts when needed.

I created a social media guideline that we post in the about section of our Facebook page, though it applies to all our social media platforms. This is referred to any time we deal with comments that do not meet our guidelines. Guidelines or policies like this can help maintain a sense of purpose, keeping comments related to the post, discouraging bad

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behavior that while protected, doesn't often encourage people to participate in discussions. *See the policy on Facebook: www.facebook.com/pg/MyODFW/about*

I encourage active commenting across all of our platforms. To do this, I not only answer questions, I actively dialogue with people in the comments to encourage more commenting and to keep things on topic. This is time-consuming, but it sets a standard for how your social media will be managed, and people expect it to stay this way.

Each platform is run with its own sense of purpose, its own voice and with the same guidelines, all of which create a safer space for more people to feel empowered to comment and participate in dialogue.

Taming the trolls

The second key factor is maintaining a consistent presence in the comments of posts and knowing when to use private conversation platforms like direct messages.

Even the most purposeful social media will still attract trolls. In fact, the more purposeful, the more potent the trolls can be. Dealing with trolls can be exhausting work, and the most important thing for anyone who has to manage difficult comments and commenters on a regular basis is to take care of yourself first. Know your limits, and don't get overwhelmed. When I've reached my negativity limit, I often take a walk to clear my head and reset my focus. There are many ways to handle the negativity associated with online forums today, but being able to set some boundaries and putting your own health and safety first is the most important thing.

There are many kinds of trolling behavior on social media, but the most typical are commenters who purposefully attack the purpose of the social media platform you've built or those who try to derail the conversation or the topic of a particular post. Knowing what a troll's intentions are can help make managing them easier.

Commenters that constantly attack the purpose of the social media platform, because they disagree with it, can be frustratingly consistent or relentless. This distracts from the purpose of each and every post. So, I often pull them over to the DMs, or direct message area, to engage with them privately. More often than not, they want attention, and even a 15-20 minute chat in the DMs can take their focus off the destructive behavior of derailing a particular post. But it won't often solve the overall problem, and you should not expect it to.

For trolling behavior that seeks to derail a particular conversation, I'll often call the commenter out directly and encourage them to participate in the topic of conversation, reminding them that off-topic comments are not necessarily protected speech and can be deleted. This often results in another comment more directly related to the topic at hand. If possible, I try to leave it there. It shows strength and keeps them operating within the social media guidelines.

In a well-built and solidly maintained online community, you will develop allies. And while they are good for the ego and for helping stand up to bad behavior, they can sometimes get carried away and make things worse. It's a good idea to maintain good relationships with your online community allies, so you can jump into their DMs and remind them of the purpose of the community and of the post. They usually appreciate this and desire to stay in your good graces. This can make them more effective in how they communicate with trolls on your behalf, thereby increasing the likelihood that the troll will abandon their efforts to derail the conversation.

There isn't a one-size solution to fit every situation you will encounter while managing an online community. Like any community, setting guidelines, communicating clearly, following-up, maintaining courteous behavior by modeling it for others, having patience and using your ability to wield a form of enforcement — whether that's banning someone for a set period of time or reporting their behavior to the social networks — are some of the most effective strategies out there.

Contributed by Timothy Akimoff, social media director, Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife