



Preparing For Your Journey Into Social Media Culture

PRINCIPLES & BEST PRACTICES

If you're going to a foreign country where you don't speak the language, you're probably going to try to find ways to get to know that country's customs in advance of your trip. Similarly, if you've never used social media before, it's important to develop some basic literacy in the culture, concepts and language of this new medium.

Luckily, none of this information is top-secret. Whereas businesses use to keep their media strategies under wraps, today's companies reveal their media plans by public engagement in online media. People who live in the internet on a daily basis – through Facebook, Twitter and beyond – can also serve as a sounding board for your questions.

Before you jump in and create accounts on every social media site, do a virtual visit. Whether it's Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, blogging, or whatever comes next that we can't even imagine, these tools are all live and happening, 24/7, right now! Even as you're reading this!

On most sites, browsing is open to all, regardless of whether you've registered as a user or not. At any point – on coffee or meal breaks, or when you wake up and when you go to sleep (after or before the Shema, if you like) – you can access these worlds; visit them, listen to the language, and let the denizens of this brave new world be your tour guides into what's possible.

Dream big and imagine yourself in these new worlds: what conversations do you want to participate in, and with whom? How do you want to use these new tools to lead? How can these tools help open you and your students to new ideas and conversations?

GETTING ACCLIMATED: SOME RULES OF THE ROAD FOR ENGAGING IN SOCIAL MEDIA

1. **“Shma Yisrael” (Hear/Listen, O Israel).** Once you've got an account with a particular social media space, get to know it by listening/reading

twice as much as you contribute to the space, especially in those early days. Set a schedule for yourself so you're carving out time from your day for this important engagement work. Notice who is leading which conversations and engage with them.

2. **“Aseh lahem rav” (find for yourselves a teacher).** This world is new, and it's okay to have questions. The challenge is finding the right person/people to answer them. This could be a professional social media consultant who is paid to show you the ropes or a hired tour guide into the brave new world with the tour specially tailored for you. If you're looking for something more general, a local to show you around, you might want to consider a particularly web-savvy student or a family member who's well-versed in social media. They can show you the technical aspects of social media use. Once you have the technical literacy, you can also use your creativity to imagine how it might be used in your specific context.
3. **“Tadir v'she'ayno tadir, tadir kodem” (in the case of some event that happens regularly and one that happens irregularly, the priority is with the regular event).** Use the tools that are the most widely used in your field first – we recommend Facebook, unless there's a tool that's more widely-used in education. Once you understand Facebook's ability to share content and conversation, you have a baseline for understanding that blogging provides more space for content and commenting than Facebook, while Twitter provides less, for example.

4. **“Kol yisrael areyvim zeh lazeh” (all Jews are responsible for each other) and “v'ahavta le're'akha kamokha” (love your neighbor as yourself).** Just like in real life, we have a responsibility to treat each other well on the internet. This includes engaging in civil discourse, appreciating the contributions of others and being generous in matters of disagreement as well as in sharing content, ideas and energy around a particular discussion. The issue of *lashon hara* (evil speech) is particularly relevant to the contemporary temptation to think-type-and-post as part of the same muscle motion. But given the chance to take a moment and think about what we're doing, we add a layer of intentionality (*kavanah*) that can only elevate the holiness of the communication. As Los Angeles spiritual community IKAR put it, “Pause Before You Post.”

GENERAL BEST PRACTICES FOR SOCIAL MEDIA

As technology develops, it also changes. The best practices we learn this month may no longer be the best practices used in three months' time. Whatever changes may come, they will surely be based on user experience of previous social media iterations.

Therefore, we all must be active users, maintaining our fluency with the available tools, continuing to imagine new uses for them, and embracing the inevitable changes that come with a developing field like online interaction. This requires ongoing experimentation, trial and error and evaluation, and will require many hours from

us over the course of our respective careers.

In addition to staying literate, it also helps to have a plan for using social media and to be flexible enough to change that plan when necessary. Current events and unanticipated new topics spring up that might not have been a part of the original plan; a nimble editorial director can help prioritize what to post and when.

All that said, here are some best practices to get you started:

BLOGGING

For educators and teachers, blogging can be helpful in creating an online repository of items on a particular topic. Blogs enable you to collect all kinds of content – text links, images, video etc – and conduct moderated conversations on the items posted. You can also choose the privacy settings that you want – from having one person post content to having multiple editors, and from having an open contribution model to having a site that is password-protected and which requires editor approval before posting. But before you get started, you need to think about the product you’re creating. Here are some guidelines:

Consider your Goals & Tone

- Will your blog primarily serve to collect and post outside articles or to host discussions inspired by those articles? (The best blogs do both, but depending on the person-power behind the blog, you may have to choose.)
- Will it be written in a “teacher’s” or “administrator’s” tone? Or will students be entitled/expected to contribute in their voices?

- What does a successful blog look like to you? Engaged conversations? Page impressions? Number of people who share your posts?
- Will you be linking to other blogs? Will you encourage students and blog contributors to comment on other blogs on related subjects, or will your blog be its own separate, private classroom space?

What Tools Will You Use to Create Your Blog?

- Speak with your IT team and see if there’s a way to create/embed a blog module on your organization’s website. They may be able to do this at little or no additional charge.
- Use one of the free or close-to-free online blog formats: Blogger (easiest, drag-and-drop design, owned by Google); Typepad (a bit more customizable and pretty user-friendly); WordPress (can be challenging to people who aren’t tech savvy, but gives more options for customizing, especially if you pay for more advanced access to their platform).

Create a Content Plan & Editorial Calendar

- The best blogs know what their voice is and are committed to posting regularly. It doesn’t have to be daily, but readers want to know that you’re committed to posting fresh, current content for their consumption. This creates a reassuring reliability for your readers.
- Will someone be tasked with supervising the blog, coordinating content and moderating comments?

Develop guidelines for content, editors/content providers, and distribution

- Who can contribute? All students, students & parents, guest contributors?
- Will you be accepting comments? Should comments be reviewed and approved by an editor before publishing?
- Will you be sharing blog posts with other audiences, inside or outside your educational framework? Will you be using Facebook to promote posts and encourage deeper conversation? Will you be using Twitter to promote posts and engage a wider audience through use of hashtags?

Use the Strengths of the Medium

Blogs can contain links, embedded videos, photographs and slide presentations. It's a chance to go more in-depth than you can on Facebook or Twitter, but keep the content short-ish (400 words recommended) and punctuated with visuals to keep readers interested, and to let them know you respect their time by not overwriting.

FACEBOOK

Facebook is a tricky space for teachers and students to navigate, separately and together. There are many online resources devoted to privacy issues for teens on the web, and even if students are past their teenage years, the challenge of how to define and accept "friends" on Facebook will likely require consideration and the creation of a classroom policy by educators. (Some guidelines are available on the Facebook site itself.)

However, Facebook is an increasingly important tool for mobilizing people to action around

a certain issue, whether it's to raise funds for a project via "crowdfunding" – a trend that raised millions last year in the US alone – or to raise awareness of an upcoming event or political action.

Advice on using Facebook effectively varies, partially because this tool's interface changes frequently. However, here are some basic guidelines for effective Facebook use that we hope will be helpful, independent of layout and content changes – and it's no accident that most of them, as attitudes more than practical "how-to" tips, can also be applied to other kinds of communications and social media tools:

- **Be considerate.** This is true not just in how often you post, but in what you post. For what purpose do people come to your page? Information? Updates on projects? Inspiring words from field experts and community leaders? Know why you're there organizationally, and why your readers are there, and find the gentle medium between those two sets of goals.
- **It's not a numbers game.** Although you might be tempted to think that a high number of subscribers to a page equals social media success, you should also look at how the subscribers' level of engagement.

Think about all the email newsletters you subscribe to and then delete without reading them. What would those email newsletters have to do differently in order to attract your attention and make you feel engaged, connected and more invested in the projects they represent? Figure out what the secret to engagement is – where your strength is as a

project – and do more of it. For instance, see next tip...

- **Reach out to constituents individually** (when appropriate). This includes looking at your most vocal constituents a little more closely: what other things do they like? What prompts a comment or a “share” from them? Reach out to them to thank them for their participation in your online campaign, discussion or initiative – it lets them know that they’ve been heard and that they’re important. You can reach out publicly, by tagging them in a particular status you think they’ll appreciate (do this considerately) or send them a private message, opening up a deeper conversation through one-on-one contact.

Warning: Do not tag people in photos because you want them to see the photos – most people get very annoyed and may unsubscribe from your future messages if you engage in this practice. To share a post or a photo with someone, send it to them privately – they’ll likely appreciate the special care as well as the consideration.

- **Use the tools of the medium.** Like blogging, Facebook enables uploads of video, photos and text. So when it comes to storytelling about your project or initiative, tell your story by telling AND showing them the impact or energy of your work through both words and images. Facebook Pages also has stats available to page administrators, so you can see which posts have the widest reach and the best interactions.
- **Re-post, cross-post and refer to other posts.** But if you re-post something your audience

may have seen before, have a good reason for re-using it. Good reasons may include: taking the conversation deeper (see tip below), looking at the piece in light of current events or media trends, or an occasional “ICYMI” (in case you missed it), but don’t overuse this explanation, or people will consider your posting repetitive and lazy.

- **Be an active part of the conversation.** When you host content on your Facebook page, view it as a chance to engage readers in a conversation. Ask a question to start with and share it with a few “power users,” asking their input. Then monitor these conversations as they develop, and keep them going by contributing expertise and asking additional questions. **Warning:** If you see people emerging with comments that are not constructive and do not enhance the conversation, consider encouraging them to make comments that move the discussion forward. If they continue to post derogatory or unhelpful comments, consider deleting their posts on a case-by-case basis, or blocking them entirely (if they exhibit hate speech in their comments).

TWITTER

Twitter is a much terser medium, so it won’t give you as much commenting satisfaction as blogging or Facebook. But it is an effective medium for promoting posts and organizational messages more widely, and for encouraging conversations to sprout ideas in new places.

- Listen twice as much as you tweet – get to know the culture and the voices in the space

you're occupying online (start by following #jnets #jedchat #jsocent #roicom #limmud

- You have 140 characters, so use them strategically
 - Shorten links
 - Shorten language
 - Use hashtags – putting # and a word at the end of tweets helps organize them as a topic. (For help and best practices for hashtags, see here.)
 - Proofread your message before you tweet – make sure it reflects the content and tone you want to put out there.
 - Acknowledge sources (use the abbreviation RT for retweets/HT for “hat tip” to acknowledge that it’s from another source).
- Involve other people in the conversation strategically, by “tagging” them in the posts by using the @ symbol and their screen name (e.g.: “@estherk, check out our new blog post about Jewish movie stars!”)
- Avoid “text-speak” if possible; including “LOL”s
- Think about how much posting you can manage and commit to a schedule (once a day is a good start), but be nimble enough to tweet more when you have important and time-sensitive information to share.
- Pay attention to when people respond, RT.