

# Tweet Freely: Your Social Media Policy and You

by Aaron Lester

IF YOU'VE EVER BLOGGED, TWEETED, updated your status on Facebook, or sent an e-mail, you know what it's like to have "click regret." Click regret is when you write something—from a 140-character tweet to a pithy e-mail response—and click "send," "update," or "publish," only to then realize that what you wrote was not what you meant at all. Or worse yet, you just broadcasted particularly personal—or even embarrassing—information to a huge or unintended audience.

That's exactly what happened to Gloria Huang, a social media specialist at the national headquarters of the American Red Cross, in Washington, D.C. "I was shocked and horrified," Huang said of her recent click regret moment involving the popular social media service Twitter. "Your first instinct is to run and hide, but you can't. It's public. It's out there."

In February, Huang spent a Tuesday evening like many of her age and profession, periodically checking in on Facebook, Twitter, and other social media accounts. Just before going to bed that night, Huang sent the following tweet:



There was nothing particularly outrageous about the tweet, except that

instead of sending it from her personal account (@riaglo), Huang mistakenly used her employer's Twitter account (@RedCross). It has since become known in the Twitterverse as, the "rogue beer tweet." Huang went to sleep that night blissfully unaware of the mix-up.

Wendy Harman, director of social media for the American Red Cross, might not have slept as well as Huang that night. She began receiving calls soon after the errant tweet went live. But to her credit, Harman didn't panic. Instead she responded with one of the more elegant and humorous tweets one might read on Twitter.



After learning of her mistake, Huang also attempted to contain any damage done by the errant tweet—this time, using her personal Twitter account:



Harman and Huang's approach was successful. According to Huang, the organization saw a slight bump in donations in the days that followed the incident. The Dogfish Head beer company

used their blog and Twitter account to spark a buzz and send would-be donors to the Red Cross. And HootSuite, the social media tool that Huang used to broadcast her errant tweet, also got in on the act—the company sent beverage cozies to both Dogfish and Huang, and donated \$100 to the Red Cross.

It's always nice when a story has a happy ending, but in this case the Red Cross may have set the gold standard for social media click regret damage control. It's true that for a group used to jumping into real disaster zones, the Rogue Beer Tweet of 2011 was small potatoes. Yet the incident does raise real concerns for nonprofits everywhere that have become increasingly dependent on social media to create relationships, promote advocacy, spread mission, and even fundraise.

While the Red Cross's social media mishap was relatively benign, other, more serious Twitter foul-ups making news lately show how dangerously powerful the medium can be. An Indiana deputy district attorney was fired recently for advocating on his personal Twitter account the use of "live ammunition" on the protesters in Wisconsin, who were demonstrating against Governor Scott Walker's plan to curtail collective bargaining rights.

The Indiana case shows how social media has blurred the line between employees' personal and professional lives in recent years. Organizations are responding by establishing social media

policies and approaches that deal with their employees' 24-hour online presence. Whether tweeting from a personal account or keeping a personal blog, or engaging in social media through organizational accounts, employees should realize that they are speaking for the organization they work for—for good or bad. Despite our best attempts to remain anonymous on the web, it is becoming harder and harder to do so. “When you work for us, you are an ambassador for the Red Cross, whether you like it or not and whether we like it or not,” said Harman. (Harman added that she is thrilled with the social engagement of her far-flung staff.)

There have been scores of other firings and legal sanctions in the recent past, not all in the public or nonprofit spheres. In April 2010, Mike Bacsik, a former producer at KTCK-AM, in San Antonio, Texas, was fired for a racist tweet. In July 2010, Journalist Octavia Nasr was fired by CNN for tweeting what appeared to be pro-Hezbollah comments. Chad Ochocinco, of the NFL's Cincinnati Bengals, was fined for breaking the league's rules on social media in August 2010. And back in 2009, ex-rocker Courtney Love was sued in the first known case of Twitter libel.

Risks like these—breaking confidentiality agreements, releasing unauthorized photographs, creating hostile work environments via sexual harassment or discrimination, or breaking other laws—are all possible outcomes in a world where social media is king.

Nonprofits can and do lawfully discharge employees for such offenses. In fact, federal and state laws require employers to take action to prevent or eliminate harassment both in the workplace and on social media sites. As with all types of workplace behavior, an employer may be liable for the employee's online actions, according to the website SocialWorkplace.com.

## Why We Need Social Media Policies

In this social media landscape, according to experts and those in the trenches, you'd better have a plan—both to limit/contain embarrassing social media mishaps and to guard against the less-likely but potentially more damaging offenses.

Emily Culbertson, a web and social media strategist based in Chicago who works with nonprofits and foundations, believes that social media policies are essential. According to Culbertson, organizations should have a policy that articulates “common expectations” around the use of social media. “A social media policy should not say ‘Here's what you can and can't do online.’ But there are ways to relate and learn online that don't cross that bright line,” she explains.

Culbertson is not alone in her views. The conversation has shifted over the last few years from whether or not to even have a policy to how best to create a living set of guidelines and principles based on organizational values.

Beth Kanter, coauthor of the 2010 book *The Networked Nonprofit*, says, “A social media policy should be one that supports and strengthens the organization's social media strategy, not a set of commandments that start with ‘Thou shall not do X.’ It should be encouraging, but also provide guidance.”

Holly Ross, executive director of the Nonprofit Technology Network (NTEN), based in Portland, Oregon, says there is no way to completely eliminate the errant tweet or the unfortunate Facebook update, but in anticipation of such incidents every organization should have a social media policy. Ross, who admitted to once mistakenly tweeting about needing a haircut using NTEN's Twitter account instead of her own, says social media policies should be “married to the organization's culture and mission. It should reflect who the organization is.”

It's clear from the rogue beer tweet that the Red Cross is relatively comfortable with its social media presence—even when the unexpected happens. Huang said that their approach at the Red Cross has been to create not necessarily rules so much as a set of guidelines. “It's important not to restrict people but to let them find their own voices.”

The Red Cross, which employs 35,000 people working in nearly 700 locally supported chapters around the country, helps employees find their voice by continually educating them about the attitudes and culture surrounding social media. “We try very hard to empower our people to have their own personalities on social media,” Huang says. Not every Red Cross employee uses social media, but the challenge of embracing the tools—along with the inherent lack of control over them—requires that the organization present a confident voice to its employees.

Red Cross CEO Gail McGovern did just that. Soon after the rogue beer tweet, McGovern sent Huang a personal e-mail to make sure she was doing all right and felt good about the organization's response. McGovern realized that the trade-off of having an engaged and responsive staff tuned into social media might entail the occasional online hiccup.

Social media policies aren't just a challenge for established giants like the Red Cross. Younger, smaller nonprofits also grapple with these issues. Being cheap, fast, and loud, social media can be a boon for smaller groups with smaller budgets. At the Public Conversations Project in Watertown, Massachusetts, the communications and social media team rely on a social media strategy instead of a codified set of policies. According to Susan Countryman, director of communications and development at the Public Conversations Project, “Social media should be integrated into an organization's overall

strategy, mission, and values, so you already have standards built in.”

The Public Conversations Project’s goal is to bring deeply divided groups together in dialogue and facilitate a mediation process between polarized groups. With twelve full-time staff, the group feels it is nimble enough for social media to remain an organic extension of their core values. “We’re small enough that we can remain collaborative,” said Roger Baumann, the Public Conversations Project’s social media coordinator. Countryman added, “The gist of what we do as an organization is thoughtful communication, so at this point it’s less of a concern for us.”

Both Countryman and Bauman agree that the most important aspect of their social media plan is that it humanizes the organization. “Relationship building is the core of development and communications,” said Countryman, adding that there’s no better way to do that than by using social media effectively.

For Mobilize.org, a “Millennial-led” nonprofit based in Washington, D.C., the use of social media is a natural fit for the group. Not only has everyone at the organization grown up with some form of social media always at their fingertips, but with only seven full-time staff and no advertising budget, tools like Facebook and Twitter are the best way to engage their audience. “We understood that this is the primary way our generation is communicating,” said Ayofemi Kirby, director of communications. “It’s a business imperative for us to get out there and be part of the conversation.”

But even this group, run by and for Millennials, has felt the need for a social media policy. “We make it clear to every staff member and every intern that there are certain expectations around social media that they have to follow,” Kirby said. It’s nice to use the free social media

tools, she added, “but we want to use a unified, organizational voice.”

Like most people interviewed for this piece, Kirby stresses that a social media policy should not be restrictive. In fact, the group mandates that every staff member and intern be active on at least one personal social media platform. “We don’t try to limit or control the use of social media,” she said. “There is always resentment if you try to control.”

### What Social Media Policies Should Feel Like

The fear and distrust that once clouded upper management’s discussions of social media policy have given way to a more nuanced and collaborative approach that embraces the sometimes out-of-control—but always engaging and responsive—nature of these tools.

As Kanter, named one of the most influential women in technology by *Fast Company* magazine in 2009, describes it: “Social media policy needs to be a living document. It isn’t a bunch of boilerplate written by a lawyer that sits in a drawer. Training and education must accompany the policy—and of course there must be a culture of learning, not blame. I think the recent example of how the Red Cross handled their social media mistake is something that we should all strive for.”

The Red Cross rogue beer tweet may live on as a pivotal event in the ever-changing social media landscape. With its adroit response, the Red Cross acknowledged that we are all human and that we all make mistakes. In fact becoming more human is a goal all organizations should aspire to.

But what about those fireable offenses? What happens when an employee crosses that bright line? For their part, the Red Cross has developed two distinct documents. One document encourages and guides employees

on how best to manage social media accounts. The other lays out clearly what is not acceptable social media behavior.

But the Red Cross has taken a light-handed approach, says Harman. One document reads in part, “Your communications should be transparent, ethical, and accurate.” It then refers employees to communication policies already in place that are governed by the organization’s fundamental principles and core values, as well as its official code of conduct.

The most powerful thing about social media is that it allows more and more people to directly participate in “the conversation.” At the same time, the most dangerous thing about social media is that it allows more and more people to directly participate in “the conversation.” But there’s no putting this genie back in the bottle. After all, you can’t very well have your tweet, blog post, Facebook update, or video “go viral” without giving up some control over the message.

Huang, the now infamous beer tweeter, said of her experience, “Your little corner of the Internet can quickly spread to be all over the Internet.” Once we are all comfortable with—and embrace—that assumption, the better and more effective we will become at using these tools.

*For more information about all things social media, check out Beth Kanter’s blog at [bethkanter.org](http://bethkanter.org), or visit [socialmediagovernance.com](http://socialmediagovernance.com) for access to a database of dozens of different organizations’ social media policies.*

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