Guidelines for Social Networking and Web Sites

Technological communication (also known as social networking) is becoming increasingly popular in today's society. This is the way young people communicate, relate to others, and ultimately share information.

The reasons for 4-H groups to become more involved in social networking are compelling. Let's get some facts:

- Only 8% of students agreed that administrations (adults) should stay out of social networking sites and that they are for youth only.
- Facebook has more than 800 million active users.
- The average Facebook user has about 130 friends.
- The average social networker spends approximately 55 minutes on a site per day.
- More than 15 hours is spent on Facebook for the average user.
- Privacy and user controls are readily available.

These statements support the idea that social networking and web sites are very effective ways of communication among clubs, members, and administrations. Although this all seems promising, social networking and web sites also pose potential risks. To ensure safety and effectiveness, note these suggestions:

1. An advisor and/or 4-H professional should be a member of the group.
2. The group needs a monitor to encourage and monitor dialogue.
3. Sites must provide settings that require comments to be approved before they are posted
4. No negative comments, articles, or pictures against the club, county program, or people should be allowed on the site.
5. Currently social networks are open only to youth ages 13 and above. By law youth ages 12 and under are not permitted to be on a social network. Instead, members under 13 years old should use a parent's profile.

The suggestions above really are just suggestions, not hard and fast rules. The idea is for a site to balance safety and effectiveness with openness. Otherwise, it loses its appeal to youth and is not used.

That said, a few hard and fast rules are also in order:

1. All photos on the site must be accompanied by signed photo release forms. Youth should not be tagged or otherwise identified in photos on websites.
2. The social network cannot be the only means of communication among group members.
3. The group must have a written policy that deals with youth who post inappropriate material on the 4-H page.
4. 4-H professionals control only who and what goes on the county 4-H page.
5. When using the 4-H emblem and other logos, groups must follow the established state and federal guidelines.

It is important to be aware of what youth in America are interested in and to seize opportunities to connect with them. Guiding youth through these new paths is critical; left to forge the paths on their own, youth can quickly get into trouble. Participating in social networking sites allows 4-H professionals and volunteers to connect with youth members and, potentially, to gain more members. Following are some ideas for connecting with youth online:

1. Collaborate with other groups such as camp counselors and junior fair board.
2. Show youth how social networks can be used by employers as an online resume.
3. Create project support groups that enhance current project books and allow youth across Ohio to share with each other and project experts

Other examples include posting meeting minutes so that members who have to miss a meeting can stay in touch and be informed; and posting news and reminders, perhaps in combination with email, so the club can save money, give members convenient access to current information, and operate in a way that is environmentally friendly. Another benefit of creating a group for youth and advisors is the ability to conduct a live "chat" or even skype with the members of the group. This allows for committees to work on a project from the comfort of their homes or office. All these steps lead to better communication and make for better clubs and community.

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Resources:
*Guidelines for Utilizing Social Networking Pages in 4-H Youth Development Programs. C*hristopher K. Simeral, Dana R. Anderson, Roy Turley, Sherri L. Farley, Cooperative Extension Agents, 4-H Youth Development, University of Kentucky—Cooperative Extension Service.

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