



MEMBERSHIP

A Pledge to Support Civility

Many of your members likely use social media to share and connect online, but those same platforms can be used to troll or bully. To support productive engagement, one association created a civility pledge built on mutual respect. Here's how they did it.

By Tim Ebner | Nov 29, 2017

Name-calling is never a good thing, but it's a common occurrence when harsh rhetoric or strong opinions get into the mix on social media networks. Sometimes it turns into flat-out nastiness and cyberbullying.

That's been especially true over the last year or so, says Liz Spittler, creative media director at the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics and executive editor of *Food & Nutrition Magazine*.

Last month, the academy took a stand against internet trolls by introducing a "civility pledge" that members and others in the broader profession can take.

The pledge and corresponding campaign are being run by the magazine team—a natural fit, Spittler says, because the magazine already had a stream of content related to [best practices for social media use](#).

No one is required to sign on, but those who agree to [the Pledge of Professional Civility](#) promise to support professionalism in public communications and online communities through four basic principles:

- to demonstrate respect to my colleagues and all others
- to support productive dialogue and positive engagement

- to model professional conduct in all my public communications and actions
- to discourage the public criticism of my colleagues, even when we do not agree

Since *Food & Nutrition* launched the initiative in mid-October, more than 700 people have taken the pledge. The academy anticipates that more will sign on as member practice groups and state and local affiliate organizations begin referencing it in their annual activities.

“Mostly, we’ve been hearing from educators [asking] for guidance or lessons to share with students,” Spittler says. “They’re seeing national and global leaders treat each other in certain ways. Are they taking that in as ‘this must be the way that professionals behave?’”

Campaigning for Civility

It’s no secret that online communities can turn toxic quick.

My colleague Ernie Smith **wrote about this scenario** in a blog post earlier this year and stressed the importance of making an investment in both people and technology to keep the discourse civil.

In the last year or so, the academy has seen instances **where members were personally attacked** or harassed on social media. Rather than focus on the name-calling, Spittler and her team wanted to take a campaign approach that promoted respectful and civil discourse. The campaign was designed to speak to both members and the general public, and it gained early buy-in from attendees at this year’s annual meeting, where it was first announced.

“The attendee enthusiasm was already really high and generally really positive,” Spittler says. “We said, let’s harness that and get people on board with the idea of building and supporting constructive discourse.”

The campaign is visible across social networks. Members who sign up to take the pledge can display a digital badge, and the hashtag —#PROcivility—already **is going viral with members**.

Beyond an Ethics Code

The academy isn’t the first group to roll out a civility pledge. But Spittler says its pledge is unique because it was informed by **the profession’s code of ethics** but stands alone as an optional commitment for both members and nonmembers alike.

“[*Food & Nutrition*] helped to reinforce a distinction [between the pledge, which is a voluntary commitment, and the academy’s code of ethics, which credentialed nutrition and dietetics professionals are required to follow,” she says. “The code of ethics really comes at dietetics from the perspective of patient safety, whereas the pledge is a commitment to civility and respect in the way that we treat each other.”

The member response has been positive so far.

“Having something that everybody can agree with is kind of a relief,” Spittler says. “Any organization that is looking for a similar type of program can take this one and adapt it or customize it to their audience. We’ve already done the work. Anything we can do to help other organizations to support civility in social media, we are absolutely happy to do.”

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By Tim Ebner

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