



Practice Paper of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics: Social Media and the Dietetics Practitioner: Opportunities, Challenges, and Best Practices



ABSTRACT

Social media tools, including blogs, social networks, and media-sharing sites, help nutrition and dietetics practitioners reach broader audiences and connect directly with the public. In many ways, social media has transformed the practice of dietetics and has opened up new avenues for communicating food and nutrition information. Social media has been an effective tool for virtual nutrition counseling, patient education, peer-to-peer support, and public health campaigns. Increasingly, nutrition and dietetics practitioners are using social media to network and collaborate with colleagues, conduct a job search, stay current with new research, champion a cause, promote products or services, and build a business. The potential role of social media in the profession is far reaching, yet there are important guidelines to follow related to ethics and professionalism. When using social media, nutrition and dietetics practitioners must remember that they are governed by the same Code of Ethics that guides all other aspects of practice. In addition, it is critical to have a thorough understanding of all the factors related to social media professionalism, including disclosure rules from the Federal Trade Commission, patient/client privacy and confidentiality as covered by the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act, and copyright laws that protect intellectual property. In today's digital age, it is essential for nutrition and dietetics practitioners to recognize the professional opportunities and challenges of social media. Failing to effectively and ethically use social media can reflect poorly on the individual practitioner and the profession. Certain violations may have legal implications. The purpose of this Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics practice paper is to provide guidance on social media's relevance, potential applications, best practices, benefits, and risks. *J Acad Nutr Diet.* 2016;116:1825-1835.

SOCIAL MEDIA REFERS TO THE ever growing and evolving web-based and mobile technologies that have dramatically changed how people get information, connect, and communicate. It represents a vast ecosystem structured

around four main usages: publishing, sharing, discussing, and networking.¹

Previously referred to as “new media,” social media is an integral part of all media. It represents a dominant way that many people receive news. However, now people are in charge of their own newsfeeds and can engage directly with their news sources. For instance, the use of Facebook and Twitter as a source of news is rapidly rising.² Communications is no longer one way or simply about broadcasting to a passive audience. Social media thrives on connections and allows the public to comment on articles, challenge or praise authors, and share information with family and friends. Social media also has ushered in an era that allows anyone to be a publisher, which has resulted in the democratization of influence.³

The term *social media* transcends the concept of media and now refers to all the ways people interact and connect with one another, both personally and professionally online. Brian Solis, a

social media thought leader, digital analyst, and anthropologist, describes social media as a shift in how people discover, read, and share news, information, and content.⁴ It is a fusion of sociology and technology—transforming monologue (one to many) into dialogue (many to many).

Increasingly, the internet has become a primary source of health information. Pew Research Center found that 72% of adult internet users go online to find information about their health, such as seeking a diagnosis, exploring treatment, or searching for others who share similar health concerns.⁵ Numerous investigators have documented the growth of the internet as a source of food and nutrition information.^{6,7}

Growing numbers of nutrition and dietetics practitioners have created food and nutrition blogs or websites and are using social media to educate the public, attract new clients, network, engage with patients, promote books or other products, and

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The Continuing Professional Education (CPE) quiz for this article may be taken at www.eatrightPRO.org. Simply log in with your Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics or Commission on Dietetic Registration username and password, go to the My Account section of My Academy Toolbar, click the “Access Quiz” link, click “Journal Article Quiz” on the next page, then click the “Additional Journal CPE quizzes” button to view a list of available quizzes. Non-members may take CPE quizzes by sending a request to journal@eatright.org. There is a fee of \$45 per article for non-member Journal CPE. CPE quizzes for Academy practice papers are valid for 3 years after the issue date in which the articles are published.

build a professional brand. *Food & Nutrition Magazine* features guest bloggers who are members of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics.⁸ The magazine hosts four guest blogs: Stone Soup, The Feed, The Cutting Board, and Student Scoop. The online posts are promoted via @FoodNutriMag social channels and highlighted in the print version of *Food & Nutrition Magazine*. In addition, significant numbers of nutrition and dietetics practitioners are guest bloggers or regular contributors to national websites such as Huffington Post, WebMD, and US News & World Report. Many nutrition and dietetics practitioners are choosing to monetize their blogs and social media influence via advertising, sponsored posts, endorsements, co-created content, and other types of marketing partnerships.

As the use of social media continues to grow, nutrition and dietetics practitioners need information, resources, and strategies to maintain professional and ethical standards for all online-related activities. The goal of this practice paper is to provide the necessary guidance to help nutrition and dietetics practitioners engage confidently and responsibly in social media to:

- position themselves as trusted sources of science-based information on multiple social media platforms;
- increase their digital presence to positively impact the balance of accurate online information about food and nutrition;
- broaden practice applications and seize new business opportunities enabled by social media; and
- avoid mistakes and misjudgments involving ethics, professionalism, transparency, and disclosure.

OPPORTUNITIES AND BENEFITS OF SOCIAL MEDIA

The use of social media in health care is rapidly expanding.⁹ Numerous investigations suggest that social media has the potential to change behavior and improve health outcomes.¹⁰⁻¹⁴ Social media interventions have included blogs, online communities, texts, mobile apps, social media platforms,

wearable devices, videos, web-based self-monitoring, online educational modules, and virtual nutrition counseling. Increased interaction, shared experiences, peer-to-peer support, real-time communications, wider access to information, and cost effectiveness are key benefits of using social media for nutrition education, advocacy, and public health campaigns.¹⁵⁻¹⁷

Social media is also helping to reduce the time and expense of recruiting people for clinical studies, assisting with emergency preparedness, monitoring disease activity, and gathering data that can be analyzed to help improve health.⁹ For instance, Google unveiled “Flu Trends,” which scanned millions of Google searches from around the world to track flu activity. Social networking sites, such as PatientsLikeMe (www.patientslikeme.com) and CrowdMed (www.crowdmed.com), provide a venue for people to access health information and gain support from others with the same condition or disease.¹⁵

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) uses social media as a strategic communications tool and has created a health communicator’s social media toolkit to provide guidance on integrating Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, podcasts, widgets, and other social media tools into health communication campaigns.¹⁸ Multiple benefits of social media cited by CDC include:

- increase the timely dissemination and potential impact of health information;
- leverage audience networks to encourage information sharing;
- expand reach to include broader, more diverse audiences;
- tailor targeted messages to reach specific audience segments; and
- facilitate participation, conversation, collaboration, and public engagement.

Social media engagement is fast emerging as a way to complement health communications, although more research is needed to understand the long-term effectiveness of social media on behavior change, including the relative impact of different social media applications and the potential mechanisms for monitoring and enhancing the quality and reliability of online health communications.^{10,11,13}

Nutrition and Dietetics Practitioners and Social Media

Blogs written by nutrition and dietetics practitioners may be particularly valuable to help the public make healthier food choices. Bissonnette-Maheux and colleagues¹⁹ found that women with suboptimal eating habits valued the credibility of blogs written by registered dietitian nutritionists (RDNs) and the personal connection these nutrition and dietetics practitioners provided. The women in the qualitative study cited several benefits of the blogs, including increased knowledge about new foods, nutrition trends, healthy recipes, and knowledge about nutrition. The researchers concluded that RDN blogs may be an important nutrition knowledge translation tool for preventing chronic disease.

If nutrition and dietetics practitioners are not proficient in digital technologies to communicate food and nutrition information, it is a missed opportunity that opens the doors for others to seize. Social media has allowed individuals without any nutrition credentials to communicate broadly and build large audiences. The volume of nutrition and health information online has made it difficult for the public to discern what is accurate, reliable, and science-based. The misleading, erroneous, and potentially harmful advice provided by some digital influencers and online sources has been well documented.²⁰⁻²²

As the world’s largest organization of nutrition and dietetics practitioners, the Academy’s vision is “optimizing health through food and nutrition,” and its mission is “empowering members to be food and nutrition leaders.”²³ Social media is an effective tool to help achieve this by enabling nutrition and dietetics practitioners to reach much larger audiences and develop valuable relationships with other health care professionals, the media, and the public. Social media also has the potential to improve public health and advance the career of the nutrition and dietetics practitioner—attracting clients, building a business, and providing an additional source of income.

For all nutrition and dietetics practitioners, social media can be an efficient way to network with colleagues, begin a job search, access and share new research, and have a better

understanding of the food and nutrition landscape from a consumer's point of view. Not all nutrition and dietetics practitioners may choose to be actively engaged in social media, yet it is important to have a baseline understanding due to the proliferation of social media in today's culture.

ETHICS AND PROFESSIONALISM

When using social media, nutrition and dietetics practitioners must remember they remain governed by the same Code of Ethics that guides all other aspects of practice.²⁴ Figure 1 outlines the major ethical principles that apply to nutrition and dietetics practitioners involved in social media.

Due to the growth of social media in health care, social media policies have been adopted by health professional organizations, including the American Medical Association, Canadian Medical Association, and American College of Physicians, Federation of State Medical Boards, American Nurses Association, and National Council of State Boards of Nursing.²⁵⁻²⁸ The American Hospital Association and several hospitals, including the Mayo Clinic, have introduced social media policies.^{29,30}

The Health on the Net Foundation (www.healthonthenet.org), a European nongovernmental organization, provides a code of conduct for health care professionals that includes guidelines on appropriate and ethical use of online health information.³¹ A database of social media policies

from multiple organizations, including health care institutions, can be found at Social Media Governance (www.socialmediagovernance.com).³²

Health care social media policies address multiple issues of ethics and professionalism, including patient privacy, professional boundaries, accurate and truthful information, and transparency. The majority of social media policies encourage separate personal and professional identities online. Yet, there have been arguments against this division because of the continual erosion of the line between private and public personas and the challenges with many social media platforms. For instance, Facebook allows a personal profile and a business page, making it easier to separate personal and professional identities. However, other social media platforms, such as Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat, would require users to create and maintain more than one profile to attempt separate personas, which could present challenges for some users.

DeCamp and colleagues³³ assert that health professionals should not be spending time deciding whether potential social media content is personal or professional, but whether it is appropriate for a public space. They believe that part of the draw of social media communications is the intentional blurring of boundaries, the leveling of hierarchies, and the value of transparency. All social media posts should be considered public and

special consideration must be given to patient/client privacy, respectful conduct, and the social media policies of employers.

The American College of Physicians and the Federation of State Medical Boards recommend maintaining separate personal and professional identities in online posting to avoid blurring boundaries in interactions with patients and colleagues, but suggest its guidelines are meant to be a starting point, and they will need to be modified and adapted as technology advances and best practices emerge.²⁷

The Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics has a social media policy for contributors to its website (www.eatrightPRO.org) and social media channels, including Facebook, Twitter, Google+, Pinterest, YouTube, and LinkedIn.³⁴ Because many members are using social media to campaign for national elections, the Academy has developed national campaign guidelines for social media to ensure fairness and professionalism.³⁵ Figure 2 outlines the social media parameters for members when campaigning for Academy leadership positions.

The social media section of *Working with the Media: A Handbook for Members of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics* offers advice for Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and blogging,³⁶ and previous articles in the *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics* have provided guidance on social media, including legal implications, ethical issues, professional boundaries, and

The nutrition and dietetics practitioner:

- Conducts himself or herself with honesty, integrity, and fairness (Principle 1).
- Supports and promotes high standards of professional practice (Principle 2).
- Complies with all laws and regulations applicable or related to the profession (Principle 4).
- Does not engage in false or misleading practices or communications (Principle 6).
- Treats clients and patients with respect and consideration (eg, Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act) (Principle 9).
- Protects confidential information and makes full disclosure about any limitations on his or her ability to guarantee full confidentiality (Principle 10).
- Presents reliable and substantiated information and interprets controversial information without personal bias, recognizing that legitimate differences of opinion exist (Principle 13).
- Is alert to the occurrence of a real or potential conflict of interest and takes appropriate action whenever a conflict arises (Principle 15).
- Does not invite, accept, or offer gifts, monetary incentives, or other considerations that affect or reasonably give an appearance of affecting his or her professional judgment (Principle 18).

Figure 1. Ethical and professional standards outlined in the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics/Commission on Dietetics Registration Code of Ethics that apply to all online activities. Adapted from the American Dietetic Association.²⁴

Allowed	Not Allowed
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use personal social media channels to campaign for an elected office 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use of official Academy or organizational unit social media channels; and social media channels associated with his or her employer, employees, clients, volunteer groups, or other organizations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Give Academy members a reason to vote for them 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use of disparaging or negative comments against opposing candidates
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use #eatrightPRO in the campaign 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Self-promoting comments posted on the social media channels of the Academy, affiliates, dietetic practice groups, and member interest groups
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Host, co-host, or participate in social media chats as part of a candidate's regular professional or personal social media activity (not related to election) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Host, co-host, or participate in social media chats about the elections or candidacy; tag or mention (@) Academy social media properties, including Academy group accounts, media spokespeople, and staff ambassadors in campaign posts

Figure 2. Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics national campaign and social media guidelines for member elections: www.eatrightpro.org/resource/leadership/nominations-and-elections/elections-process/national-campaign-and-social-media-guidelines.

managing online communities.³⁷⁻⁴² *Food & Nutrition Magazine* (www.foodandnutrition.org) regularly features articles on social media in its #SocialPro series and conducts #SocialPro webinars.

The Academy's Definition of Terms list provides standardized language for nutrition and dietetics practitioners to use in communications, including social media.⁴³ The Academy continuously provides resources on social media around key events, such as National Nutrition Month (www.eatright.org/resources/national-nutrition-month). These social media toolkits have included messages, sample social media posts, and images that nutrition and dietetics practitioners can share on their own social media channels. Refer to [Figure 3](#) for a social media glossary.

STANDARDS OF PROFESSIONALISM

Social media professionalism for nutrition and dietetics practitioners involves multiple factors. These issues are summarized here, with a more thorough overview in the sections that follow.

Privacy and Confidentiality

- Maintain privacy and confidentiality of patients/clients.
- Obtain consent when writing or photographing patients/clients.

- Use respectful tone when discussing patients/clients.
- Respect the privacy of blog and website visitors.
- Be familiar with privacy settings on each social media platforms.

Professional Liability

- Consider a disclaimer on a blog or website that indicates the information is not a substitute for individual advice from a health care professional.
- Review licensure requirements for individual states that may penalize for unprofessional conduct on social media or restrict out-of-state counseling.

Professional Boundaries

- Keep personal and professional profiles separate, whenever possible.
- Be cautious and selective when connecting with patients/clients on social media sites.
- Critically evaluate any online interaction with patients/clients.
- Follow social media policies of employer.

Self-Identification

- Identify professional credentials (RDN or nutrition and dietetics

technician, registered) on blog, website, and social platforms.

- Disclose employer when posting related information (eg, #employee).
- Do not post anonymously to social networking sites or blogs.
- For Academy leaders, disclose position if sharing messages about the Academy or dietetics profession.

Content Credibility

- Always provide accurate and truthful information.
- Distinguish between science-based facts and a personal point of view.
- Share only information from credible sources.
- Include the source of nutrition studies or claims cited.
- Place results of new studies in context.
- Correct misinformation and respond to inaccuracies.

Transparency/Disclosure

- Declare any conflicts of interest.
- Disclose any financial or in-kind compensation received (eg, #ad or #sponsored).
- Follow Federal Trade Commission guidance for disclosing material connections.

Affiliate link—A special URL that contains the ID or username of an affiliate (such as a blogger) to track online traffic to an advertiser's site to credit sale commissions to the affiliate.

Algorithm—Computer-based formulas used by social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, to determine what content will be shown to users.

Alt text—A short description of an image that is inserted into the HTML that can help the image show up in online image searches.

Augmented reality—Technology that integrates digital information (images, video, sound or GPS data) with the user's environment in real time.

Avatar—A visual representation of a user online (eg, social media profile picture).

Clickbait—Web content with a sensational or misleading headline that entices readers to click through to the full story.

Crowdsourcing—Harnessing the knowledge base and skills of an online community for the purpose of collaboratively solving problems or gathering ideas.

Direct message—A private message between Twitter, Facebook, or Instagram users.

Engagement—Likes, shares, comments, and other ways people interact with a specific post.

Geotag—Mappable coordinates that can be associated with a social media post; allows social media sites to index content by geography.

GIF—Graphics interchange format. An image file format that allows users to create short, animated images for sharing on social media.

Handle—Name or nickname used online and with social media.

Hashtag—The combination of the # symbol and a keyword or phrase written together without spaces to index and make a topic more searchable.

HTML—Hypertext markup language. Programming and coding language for websites and blogs.

Influencer—A social media user who can reach a significant audience and drive awareness.

Landing page—The section of a blog or website accessed by clicking a link, typically the home page. However, users can land on another page that has a specific objective, such as selling an ebook, promoting a webinar or offering, or scheduling a consultation.

Live-tweet—Real-time tweeting at a conference or event (eg, #FNCE).

Listicle—A popular narrative structure for a blog post that includes a list to help curate similar items or translate complicated information.

Meme—A visual representation of a theme often containing a comedic element shared widely online.

Nofollow links—An HTML code that can be added to outbound links on a site that tells search engines such as Google to not follow this specific link—typically used for paid links, sponsored posts, or untrusted content. Originally introduced to prevent spamming, nofollow codes allow bloggers to not pass value or influence to a link, which can help protect the blogger's SEO and page rank.

Page views—A metric of blog traffic that tracks the number of web pages users visit (such as homepage, about, recipes).

Podcast—A downloadable or streamable audio or video file on a blog or website (eg, an online radio show).

Retweet—Sharing a tweet from another user on Twitter, typically preceded by "RT."

SEO—Search engine optimization. Tactics used by website owners and bloggers to elevate content that is ranked by search engines such as Google; improving SEO helps to increase traffic or visitors.

Tags—Names or key words added to blog posts or photos.

Thread—A continuous discussion of a specific topic on a blog or social media site.

Twitter chat—A scheduled conversation on Twitter that is followed by hashtags (eg, #foodchat, #NEchat).

Unique visitors—A metric for determining a blog or website's traffic; counts each visitor once during a given period, regardless of how often they visit.

URL—Uniform resource locator. A website or blog's address on the internet; also known as a web address.

Virtual reality—Immersive multimedia that allows users to interact in simulated situations; increasingly used in health care to train, diagnose, and treat (eg, surgery simulation, phobia treatment, skills training).

Figure 3. Social media glossary: Terms commonly associated with social media platforms, blogging strategies, and website ownership.

- Clearly distinguish between editorial and advertising on blog, website, and social platforms.

Intellectual Property

- Respect copyright laws when creating and sharing content.
- Be familiar with Fair Use (www.copyright.gov) and Creative Commons (www.creativecommons.org) when sharing content created by others.
- Do not use online photos or repost articles without permission.
- Consistently cite sources and provide appropriate credit.

Personal Conduct

- Avoid unprofessional, offensive, and inappropriate behavior in private settings that can be made public via social media.
- Refrain from cyber-bullying or threatening others on social media channels.
- Avoid defaming the reputation of a colleague or other health care professional.
- Refer to employer's social media policies for direction.

TRANSPARENCY AND DISCLOSURE

Social media has provided nutrition and dietetics practitioners new opportunities to generate income and build a business through partnerships with food companies, brands, organizations, and agencies. While these marketing partnerships may prove financially beneficial, transparency is critical. Nutrition and dietetics practitioners who accept payment to promote a product or service must disclose this marketing relationship. Otherwise, it is misleading to the consumer who is unaware of the conflict of interest.

The need for transparency by nutrition and dietetics practitioners engaged in social media is not only a matter of professional ethics (Figure 1), it is mandated by the Federal Trade Commission (FTC). The FTC, whose mission is to prevent fraudulent, deceptive, and unfair practices in the marketplace, outlines in its endorsement guides that bloggers and individuals using social media are considered advertisers once

they endorse a product in exchange for any type of payment or in-kind compensation, such as free samples and sponsored travel.⁴⁴

The nutrition and dietetics practitioner as an advertiser becomes subject to truth in advertising laws and is required to disclose all “material connections” as it relates to their blogging and social media outreach. The FTC requires that all disclosures be clear, conspicuous, and made in close proximity to where the endorsement is made. This means that a general disclosure statement on a blog or website is not sufficient by FTC's standards.⁴⁵

For instance, if a nutrition and dietetics practitioner received payment to create a recipe, write a blog post, or appear in a video, when this content is shared by the nutrition and dietetics practitioner on various social channels, such as Facebook or Twitter, a form of disclosure must be included with each of these individual posts. Even though no payment was made for a specific activity, if there is some type of financial connection, such as a consultant or advisor, it is important to disclose this relationship each time related content is shared. If appearing in a sponsored video or media interview, some form of disclosure must be spoken on camera.

FTC does not mandate specific language for disclosures, as long as it is easy to understand and three factors are considered: proximity (close to the claim), prominence (viewed on any device, not buried deep within a blog), and multimedia (even audio and video). Suggested social media disclosures:

- #sponsored
- #ad
- #paid
- #client
- Company X gave me this product to review.
- I was compensated by X to write this blog post.

FTC has updated its guidance to ensure clarity when disclosing material connections. The agency now discourages the use of vague or shortened hashtags or abbreviations only known by a limited audience, such as #sp, #spon or #cl.⁴⁶ The use of #ad or #sponsored is recommended at the beginning of a post instead of the end, especially if multiple hashtags are used

and it would be easy for a consumer to miss the disclosure in the mix. Terms such as #partner, #consultant, and #advisor are frequently used, but the public may not realize payment is involved and the beneficiary of the post is not revealed. A better option is to incorporate #paid with #partner or #advisor in tweets, and write: “I am a paid consultant to X or the marketers of X” in a longer-form platform.

For many nutrition and dietetics practitioners, the challenge is not simply recognizing the disclosure requirement, but applying it to the unique and diverse set of marketing relationships they may face. Some common activities that would require disclosure:

- paid to create a recipe, photo, video, or blog post;
- received payment, free products, coupons, or gifts in exchange for mentions on social media;
- paid to make social media comments or advocate in any way on behalf of a third-party;
- compensated to host a Twitter chat or participate in other online activities;
- serve as a consultant or advisory board member and writing or responding on a related topic, even if not compensated for that specific activity;
- serve as a paid media spokesperson for a company or brand and sharing video of TV interviews or links to articles on social media channels;
- received free travel and experiences by a company, brand, or organization; and
- link to a product or company's website and receive a commission.

Disclosures not only need to be made on each social media post—such as “ad” or “sponsored” on all tweets, Facebook updates, videos, and sponsored Pinterest pins or Instagram photos—a disclosure statement is recommended for blogs. This policy statement identifies marketing relationships and outlines how the blogger chooses to work with companies or brands. DisclosurePolicy.org helps bloggers generate their own disclosure policy.

In addition to disclosure, it is important to never endorse a product that has not been tried, say things that

are not believed, or make unsubstantiated claims. If mentioning specific products that are genuinely liked and paid for by the individual, no disclosure is needed. Similarly, disclosure is not needed when writing about free products that were sampled at a store or expo, as long as there is no financial connection.

CHALLENGES AND RISKS OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Privacy and Confidentiality

One of the main issues for health care professionals involved in social media is preserving patient/client privacy and confidentiality.^{15,47,48} Health information is considered private and is covered by the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act. Personal identifying information, such as a patient or client's name, address, birth date, images, and associated health conditions may not be shared without their consent.

Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act, as modified by the Health Information Technology for Economic and Clinical Health Act, governs the use of electronic patient information by health care professionals and hospitals. While social media is not specifically referenced, privacy could be violated when posting information, comments, photos, or videos concerning a patient or client to a social networking site.^{17,47}

All personal identifying information must be removed, such as changing or omitting key patient details (name, photos), avoiding the description of rare medical problems, and not mentioning specific time frame or locations without the patient's consent.^{9,27} If nutrition and dietetics practitioners are interested in using patient/client testimonials on websites or social media channels, they must obtain written consent.

Despite professional guidance and policies, there have still been many well-publicized inadvertent breaches of the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act privacy rule involving social media, including medical blogs that featured patients, inappropriate tweets in operating rooms, posts about patients on personal Facebook pages, and offensive or revealing posts from medical students.^{16,49,50}

A survey by Antheuris and colleagues⁵¹ found that patients' main barriers for social media use were privacy concerns and unreliability of the information. With the rise in the "quantified self" movement, which involves wearable devices to track diet, exercise, and other health patterns, there has been a concern about digital sharing of information. Smith and colleagues⁵² call for a culture of proactive transparency and consent. Instead of viewing privacy as a stumbling block when it comes to gathering data for research, they assert it should be considered an opportunity to engage participants more fully in the types of research that can improve the health of all people in important and lasting ways.

Legal Issues

Beyond privacy and confidentiality, social media may expose nutrition and dietetics practitioners and their employers to additional legal risks, including antitrust issues, defamation, deceptive marketing, liability, leakage of proprietary information, copyright and intellectual property issues, and data protection.^{16,17,39}

It is essential for nutrition and dietetics practitioner bloggers and website owners to create and post the terms of service and a privacy policy for their sites. Terms of service (also known as terms of use or terms and conditions) detail the rules a user must follow when visiting the site. This is often listed as a disclaimer. A privacy policy is a statement that tells visitors about the type of information that is collected about them when they are on a blog or website, such as names, e-mails, or other means of identifying a returning user. It discloses the use of internet cookies (text files on a website that track user behavior) and reinforces the blogger's commitment to protect personal information.

This is especially important for nutrition and dietetics practitioners who are monetizing their blogs and websites, such as displaying third-party ads. Many companies and ad networks, such as Google AdSense, will not do business with bloggers who do not have a privacy policy in place.

Many countries have privacy laws that require privacy policies for commercial websites. The United States

does not have a nationwide data privacy and security law, although many individual states, such as California, have their own legal requirements. Virtually every state has a data-breach notification law, which requires notice to individuals whose personal information has been compromised in a data breach.

For blogs or websites serving an audience under the age of 13 years, there are specific requirements to comply with the FTC's Children's Online Privacy Protection Act.⁵³

Copyright Laws

As nutrition and dietetics practitioners generate content for blogs and social media, they should be mindful about the risks of copyright infringement. Copyright law protects an individual's intellectual property, such as articles, photos, designs, and other creations. Issues for nutrition and dietetics practitioners may arise with infringement on other people's work as well as protection of their own.

Copyright law permits short quotations of other materials for the purpose of criticism, commentary, news reporting, teaching, and research under fair use.⁵⁴ Copyright law also allows the use of facts and ideas reported in articles or websites; however, the expression of these facts and ideas—the exact language and structure of the piece—is protected. When citing the work of other bloggers, it is important to provide adequate credit and link back to the blog. Citing sources should be a general practice on social media.

Photos are protected by copyright, even those that are easily obtained via a Google image search.

Unless a photo or image is clearly in the public domain, such as works of the federal government, assume it is covered by copyright. Providing attribution and citing a source is not sufficient to avoid infringement.

If nutrition and dietetics practitioners are not taking their own photographs, they should explore free and inexpensive stock photos or identify photos with a Creative Commons license.⁵⁵ Creative Commons (www.creativecommons.org) is a nonprofit organization that is devoted to expanding the free use of creative works, including photos. Under a

Platform/feature	Definition	Examples
Blog	A form of self-publishing (truncated from web-log). It differs from a static website because the content is continually updated and can be interactive (eg, two-way communications, comments).	Blogging platforms: WordPress, Blogger, Tumblr, TypePad, SquareSpace, Medium
Facebook	The world's largest social network, allowing users to connect with friends, family, colleagues, and businesses—sharing updates, photos, videos, and links.	Facebook profile (personal), Facebook page (business), Facebook groups, Facebook Live (live video streaming), Instant articles (promoted articles), Canvas (rich media ads)
Twitter	A social network and media platform that enables users to publish 140-character messages along with photos, videos, and links.	Twitter tools: Hootsuite, TweetDeck, hashtags
Photo sharing	Allows posting of images uploaded by an individual or found elsewhere online.	Pinterest, Instagram, Flickr, Photobucket, Imgur, Snapchat
Video livestreaming	Online video shared in real-time.	Facebook Live, Periscope, YouTube Live, YouNow
Video sharing	Users can upload, view, share, and comment on videos.	YouTube, Vimeo, Dailymotion, Vine, Vevo (in addition to social media channels like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram)
Professional networking	Social networking focused on business rather than personal use (eg, job searches, presentation sharing, research paper sharing).	LinkedIn, Viadeo, Branchout, Slideshare, Academia
Content discovery and curation	Dedicated to the collection, curation, and organization of links to other sites.	Reddit, Delicious, Digg, Stumbleupon, Feedly, Scoop.it, Bloglovin
Wikis	A website that allows collaborative editing by users.	Wikipedia, Wikia, Wikisource, Wikieducator, Wikiquote, Wikibooks, Wikitravel, Scholarpedia

Figure 4. Definitions and examples of social media platforms and features.

Creative Commons license, photographers can give others permission to use and share their work, based on conditions the owner specifies, such as proper credit and links back to a website. Flickr.com is a major source of free downloadable Creative Commons licensed photos. Be sure to check the terms of the license. Some users prohibit commercial use of their photos and a monetized blog would qualify as commercial use.

While the owner of copyright is generally the originator of the work, exceptions are made if the work was created for someone else. In this case, the employer, not the author, is the owner of the economic rights to the work. The original author maintains the moral rights, which include the ability to object to distortions of the work that could be harmful to

the author's reputation. This distinction underscores the need for nutrition and dietetics practitioners to define intellectual property ownership when working with or for another entity. Contracts should address who owns the rights to the work produced through any partnerships and marketing opportunities.

SOCIAL MEDIA BEST PRACTICES

Social media platforms are rapidly evolving and new technologies are quickly emerging, which makes it difficult to identify a one-size-fits-all strategy for nutrition and dietetics practitioners. The level of engagement in social media will also be dramatically different depending on an individual's ultimate goals. Not every nutrition and dietetics practitioner will

need or want to connect with an audience on social media. Yet, for those who do, the following strategies can help refine and direct efforts most efficiently.

- *Identify social media goals.* Nutrition and dietetics practitioners should consider what they hope to achieve by engaging in social media. Is it simply keeping up with food trends, nutrition news, and networking with colleagues? Or is the goal to educate the public, promote products and services, and build a business? Identifying individual goals and a vision of success will dictate the best social media strategy and determine the required investment in time and resources.

- *Be selective.* Maintaining a social media presence takes time, and the more social media platforms a nutrition and dietetics practitioner is on, the more time it takes. With the complexity and rapid growth of new social platforms, it is difficult to keep up with the latest technologies and changes to existing platforms (Figure 4 identifies social media platforms and features). Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn are good places to start. Pinterest, Instagram, and Snapchat are rapidly growing, especially with the popularity of recipe sharing and the growth of the visual web (photos, videos, and infographics). Rather than attempting to master every new social platform, focus on a few, increase confidence, and build a following.
- *Know target audience.* Social media allows direct-to-consumer engagement, yet not all target audiences a nutrition and dietetics practitioner desires to reach will be active on social media. Understanding the end user will help guide message development and potential communications channels. The best way to connect with audiences is to know where they are already spending time, which may be offline or on various social platforms—from Facebook to Snapchat.
- *Add value.* When determining what to share on social media, consider the 80/20 rule as a guiding principle: 80% of social media content should benefit the audience and 20% should be self-promotional. Find ways to add value by providing updates on new nutrition studies and sharing online articles or blog posts, especially content created by food and nutrition peers and the Academy.
- *Learn from others.* Follow nutrition and dietetics practitioners who are already positively and professionally engaged in social media. Observe posts from others who are more experienced to increase confidence. Twitter and Facebook, for instance, have an etiquette and lexicon that can be confusing at first. For nutrition and dietetics practitioners who want to start a blog, begin following well-established blogs, examine the writing style, and identify desired features of the blogs.
- *Be reader-centric.* Nutrition and dietetics practitioners who are blogging, or have plans to create a blog, should keep the audience in mind when developing content. Unless a blog is specifically targeting food and nutrition colleagues or other health care professionals, readers will likely be the general public. Use clear and simple language when translating science, format text to make it more readable (eg, short paragraphs, subheads, lists, visuals), and be concise.
- *Be authentic.* Craft a voice in social media that is professional, yet personable. Nutrition and dietetics practitioners can be authoritative and still have their personality shine through. People like people. Social media engagement will increase if the audience can connect with the person behind the post.
- *Socialize content.* Quality content remains the best way to build a blog, but an audience cannot discover blog posts without support. Each time new content is added to a blog, use Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, and other social media platforms to share the content and drive viewers back to the blog. Consider these platforms part of a syndication plan to extend the reach. Social media management tools, such as Hootsuite, TweetDeck, Seismic, and Buffer, can help schedule and manage posts across several social networks.
- *Consider paid options.* Social media can be an effective way to reach mass audiences, yet the competition to break through has become more challenging. Social media platforms are evolving into media companies, controlling which messages get communicated via their platforms. For instance, many platforms have moved from chronological to algorithm-based feeds, which makes some posts invisible to followers without paid support. Depending on a nutrition and dietetics practitioner's goals, paid promotions, such as a promoted post on Facebook, can be an effective way to market products and services.
- *Be responsive.* Social media is all about two-way communications; it is a dialogue, not a monologue. When posting new information, be prepared to respond to questions and comments in a timely manner. This helps fuel conversation and establishes a sense of community.
- *Dig into data.* Nutrition and dietetics practitioners can use free tools, such as Google Analytics, to learn more about where their blog traffic originates and the user behavior on the site. It can help nutrition and dietetics practitioner bloggers get to know their readers, what they are looking for, and how they can better serve them. The data can also help identify the social platforms that are most responsive to content to help customize outreach and maximize reach.
- *Be respectful.* If a nutrition and dietetics practitioner would not say something in person, in a crowded elevator, or on a job interview, it should not be said online. Once something is posted in social media, it is in the public sphere. The reach is far and forever. Also, consider the timing of social media sharing. Refrain from posting during major newsmaking tragedies and natural disasters. Turn off pre-scheduled, automated posts so as not to appear insensitive.
- *Seek outside help.* The bar is quite high when it comes to food and nutrition blogs today. Unless nutrition and dietetics practitioners have strong technology and design skills, they should not attempt to do it all themselves. A contemporary, highly visual, and eye-catching blog is essential to promote a professional image, break through the crowded blogosphere, and gain followers. Ask colleagues who they used to create their blogs or look for design credits on popular blogs.

Do an online search for local social media consultants or designers specializing in WordPress, the most popular blogging platform.

CONCLUSIONS

Nutrition and dietetics practitioners can benefit immensely from social media. The use of digital technologies can help nutrition and dietetics practitioners connect with colleagues, promote public health, advocate for a cause, and advance their own careers. However, there are multiple areas that may pose threats if certain guidelines are not followed. Social media policies, education, and peer-to-peer mentoring can help nutrition and dietetics practitioners maximize the potential of social media, while maintaining ethical standards and professionalism.

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