

How to Use Social Media for Advocacy

Social media can sound scary—putting your thoughts out there on the internet for everyone to see. But if done correctly, it is a very powerful tool in your advocacy tool kit. Ninety-eight percent of all Congressional offices use some form of social media (Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, blogs, etc.). A recent study funded by the Library of Congress found that most Members of Congress use social media to share their positions—more so than for campaign or public relations purposes.⁵ Even if you do not feel comfortable engaging in social media yourself, simply “following” your Members on Twitter or “liking” them on Facebook will give you insight into your Members’ priorities and activities.

Here are some tips for successful use of social media for advocacy purposes:

1. **Keep it civil and clean.** The internet can be a hateful place, filled with vitriol—and nothing brings this out more than politics. Make sure you do not play a part in this, either by starting it or engaging in it. There is nothing to be gained from these types of conversations and if you participate in them, it likely will muddle your overall message and make you a persona non grata. Your goal is building relationships and being trusted and respected.
2. **Would you want your grandmother to see it?** Before you post anything on social media, a good rule of thumb is would you want your grandmother to see it? Particularly if you are using social media for advocacy on a topic important to you, you want to remain professional and appropriate.
3. **Remember, social media is a two-way street.** Use social media to engage with others—both your Members of Congress and others who care about your issue(s). If you are using social media just to push out your message, you are not using it to its fullest potential. Reply to interesting tweets; comment on Facebook posts, keeping in mind tips 1 & 2. You cannot expand your social media reach without getting involved.
4. **Include social media in all your advocacy activities.** Social media should be built into all advocacy activity these days. If you are planning a Capitol Hill advocacy day, make sure to include the Member’s Twitter handle on the schedule so your advocates can Tweet a thank you or a photo after the meeting. If you are attending a Hill Day, announce it on Facebook so any friends who might be interested also can sign up. For any “at home” advocacy days, create a hashtag that anyone can use. (#supportbiomedicalresearch)

5. **Don’t use all 280 characters.** Twitter only allows a user up to 280 characters per Tweet. It is important to do your best not to use all 280 characters in your Tweet. If you do, your followers will not be able to add comments when they Retweet you, or they will have to delete part of your original Tweet to add comments.

6. **A picture is worth some of your 280 characters.** Including pictures in your Tweets or on Facebook helps tell part of the story—but the tradeoff is that photos take up characters. When you have pictures with policymakers or of a special event, do include the photos but also be sure to give context to who is in the picture (the elected official is most important to name and list using his/her Twitter handle) using the remaining characters.

7. **Don’t change your avatar (avi) frequently.** People get used to seeing your “avi” (photo or logo) and if you change it frequently you may unintentionally “lose” people as they scroll through their Twitter or Facebook feed looking for your “old” avi. Think of your “avi” as your brand—a visual that people associate with your Tweets or Facebook posts. Pick one and stick with it as long as you can.

8. **Follow, follow, follow.** The more people you follow on Twitter, the more people will follow you. (The more people that follow you, the wider your social media reach will be and your messages read) Make sure you follow your Congressional champions, as well as the leaders from both parties. Follow the advocacy organization(s) for your issue and retweet anything interesting to your followers.

9. **Thank and express disappointment.** As much as we use social media—along with traditional forms of communication—to advocate for our issues, we need to use them to thank Members for their votes, positions, advocacy on behalf of issues important to us. Likewise, use social media as a platform to let members know when you wish they would have acted differently.

⁵ LBJ School of Public Affairs “Tweetocracy: How & Why Congress Uses Social Media”

Twitter Basics

@ = Mentions/Replies: A mention is any Twitter update that contains “@username” anywhere in the body of the Tweet. An @reply is any update posted by clicking the Reply button on a Tweet. Any Tweet that is an @reply to you begins with your username.

= Hashtag: A word or a phrase prefixed with the # symbol. A hashtag is simply a way for people to search for Tweets that have a common topic and to begin a conversation. ([#supportbiomedicalresearch](#))

RT = Retweet: A re-posting of someone else’s Tweet. Twitter’s retweet feature helps you and others quickly share a Tweet with all your followers.

MT = Modified Tweet: When making any changes to a Tweet that is not your own, it is best to change the RT (automatically inserted by Twitter) to a modified Tweet. By using MT, the Twitter community will know you made a few changes to the original Tweet and allow you to give “credit” to the original author.

DM = Direct Message: A private message sent to or from one of your followers. You can only send a direct message to a user who is following you; you can only receive direct messages from users you follow.