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A Guide to Social Media for RNLI Volunteers



Lifeboats

Contents:

1 Why we need guidelines	3
2 Using social media in your personal life	
• Who's listening?	4
• Can I talk about the RNLI?	4
• What should I avoid?	4
• What do I need to think about before uploading photos or videos?	5
3 Using social media to represent the RNLI	
• I've been thinking about setting up a social media profile – where do I start?	6
• Who is best placed to maintain the profile?	6
• Someone else has got there first – what should I do?	7
• Now I've created a profile, what content should I post?	7
• How can I make it more interesting and engaging?	7
• What tone of voice should I adopt?	8
• What should I avoid?	8
• How do I let people know we're here?	8
• What do I do when someone posts an unfavourable comment?	8
• What do I do when someone posts an offensive comment?	9
• A fellow volunteer or colleague has posted something inappropriate – what do I do?	9
4 Communicating with children online	
• How should I communicate with children on Facebook?	10
• What if a child contacts me?	11
• What about photos and videos of children?	11
5 Useful terms	12
6 Guidelines for using photos	
• Operational guidelines	14
• Copyright guidelines	14
7 Contacts for support and advice	15

1 Why we need guidelines

Many of the RNLI's volunteers use social media in a personal capacity, using a Facebook profile, for example, to stay in touch with friends or share photos.

Increasingly, many lifeboat stations, fundraising branches, museums and other RNLI volunteers are also creating their own social media profiles to help raise awareness of the charity.

The RNLI encourages the responsible use of social media. The purpose of this guide is to set out what the RNLI expects from its volunteers when using social media – from what is appropriate to mention when talking about a lifeboat shout on your Twitter feed, to the best way of creating a Facebook page for your station.

It is important to remember that we are all ambassadors for the RNLI and any social media activity that we engage in reflects on our charity. Even with the most stringent privacy settings in place, by its very nature, social media activity is never private.

You'll find a list of useful terms and phrases relating to social media at the end of this guide.

2 Using social media in your personal life

All of the RNLI's volunteers are individuals with their own opinions, tastes and views, which they are free to express.

Volunteers should, however, think carefully about who has access to their social media profiles. Some social networks offer extensive privacy settings, such as Facebook, while others are entirely public, such as Twitter.

Even with the most robust privacy settings in place, social media is never private.

Who's listening?

Journalists trawl social media for stories, photographs and other content.

Ardent RNLI supporters and lifeboat enthusiasts, who admire the work of RNLI volunteers, will be keen to connect with you on a personal level through social media.

You may also receive 'friend requests' or have your profile 'followed' or 'subscribed to' by work colleagues.

Choose carefully what information you share and who you share it with. It could be that you choose to be more open on your Facebook profile, for example, because you have only selected friends and family with whom you are well acquainted in the offline world; while you may choose only to share interesting web links and observations on your Twitter account because it can be viewed by anyone with an internet connection.

Can I talk about the RNLI?

The RNLI very much encourages our volunteers to talk about their association with our charity and the volunteer work they take part in. Our volunteers are some of our most passionate supporters and we value your role as online champions of the RNLI!

What should I avoid?

- Volunteers should remember not to discuss confidential or sensitive RNLI information on their social media profiles and should never criticise those we rescue or their families. The RNLI is a non-judgemental and non-political organisation and depends on its volunteers to respect and uphold this position.

- Volunteers should never air grievances with other volunteers or RNLI staff on their social media profiles but always through the correct and official channels designed for such purposes. If a legal process is underway, it is highly inadvisable to discuss the details through social media, and it may well prejudice the outcome or even create further evidence for one side or the other.
- Employ a common-sense approach when using adult humour or colourful language and ensure that it is appropriate for your audience, remembering again that they may share it with a wider audience.
- Posting offensive content, such as racist comments, is not acceptable and will damage our charity's reputation – it also reflects on those who work alongside you, such as fellow lifeboat crew members, so consider the impact on your colleagues of what you publish before posting.

What do I need to think about before uploading photos or videos?

Whenever the RNLI name or logo is featured in a picture or video, think carefully about how the charity will be perceived.

Never upload photos or video of operationally incorrect lifeboating, such as sponson riding, and ensure that all crew featured in a photo or piece of footage are wearing the correct kit. This applies whether you have taken the photos or footage with RNLI camera equipment or your own.

You can find operational and copyright usage guidelines for photos at the end of this guide.



A good rule to abide by is: if you wouldn't say what you are about to post on your social media profile in front of your boss, an RNLI supporter or a journalist, then don't post it!

3 Using social media to represent the RNLI

I've been thinking about setting up a social media profile – where do I start?

Social media presents an excellent opportunity to raise awareness of the RNLI, with very little resource required. But there are a few things you should consider before diving straight in.

If the profile you hope to create is representing your lifeboat station or fundraising branch, for example, you need to consult those you'll be representing – the likelihood is that they'll be glad of the free publicity (and, therefore, fundraising potential) but they may want a say in the type of content that's uploaded. Even better, they may have some time or skills to contribute. Ensure that any difference of opinion is resolved before going ahead.

Who is best placed to maintain the profile?

You wouldn't embark on any other volunteering role without adequate experience or training. In the same way, it's not wise to dabble in social media without knowing what you're doing.

- If you don't use social media in your personal life, do your research – speak to colleagues, friends or family who are familiar with it, and then use it on a personal level yourself to communicate with friends and get comfortable. There's a wealth of information available online; you can also contact the RNLI's Social Media team for advice (see the contacts section at the end of this guide). If you're still uncomfortable using social media yourself, consider asking a colleague to take on the role of moderator.
- Facebook may take up very little of your time when using it to keep in touch with old school friends, but most RNLI lifeboat station Facebook pages attract hundreds, if not thousands, of subscribers (or likes), and this requires regular monitoring of the page and updates on a weekly, if not daily, basis. If you don't have the time to check the account at least once a day, consider asking someone else to take this on, or sharing the responsibility between two or three of you.
- People sign up to social media profiles to keep up to date on the latest news. They will expect regular updates, for example a timely summary of the latest lifeboat shout or to be notified when a fundraising event or open day is coming up. They will also expect to be able to engage with you by asking questions, posting comments and hearing back from you. Are you close enough to what's going on to be able to keep your

fans/followers fully up to date and answer their queries adequately? If not, think about who might be – the station’s volunteer lifeboat press officer, for example.



Why not join our Facebook group for volunteers who manage RNLI social media profiles? It's a place where volunteers can chat, swap tips and share best practice. Just visit www.facebook.com/groups/rnlifolk and press the 'Join group' button.

Someone else has got there first – what should I do?

If you can, find out who created this profile – there’s a good chance it’s an RNLI supporter. You may be happy for them to continue, in which case you might want to ask if you can collaborate and so get access to the account – this means that they can continue with their hobby and you can ensure that content is accurate, timely and appropriate.

If there’s a conflict of opinion, you’re concerned about what’s being posted on the account and/or you cannot contact its moderator, contact the RNLI’s Social Media team at Headquarters to raise your concerns.

Now I’ve created a profile, what content should I post?

Think about who you want to reach – what is your intended audience? Are they existing RNLI supporters? If so, what is it that they love about the RNLI? What will they be most interested to see and read? If you’re hoping to attract new supporters, think about who they might be and what type of content is most likely to appeal to them.

Post content that your subscribers will be compelled to share and spread the word around their own social networks – dramatic rescue footage captured on the helmet camera, for example.

Ideas for content:

- launch alerts and rescue summaries
- fundraising events and open day details
- photos and video
- safety information, tide times and local weather information – ensure it’s accurate as people expect the RNLI to be a trusted source.

How can I make it more interesting and engaging?

Show your supporters that you’re listening and that you value their comments and feedback – ask the odd question, rather than just posting statements; make a comment among supporters’ posts; reply to their questions in a timely fashion. Think about adding a web link to further online content.

What tone of voice should I adopt?

Make sure that your tone and approach have the 'human touch' – people like to feel as if they're talking to other people on social networks, not to a faceless organisation. Talk in the first person - for example: 'We're holding our open day next week', not: 'Littletown Lifeboat Station will be holding its open day next week'. If you feel comfortable doing so, let your online supporters know who moderates the account by name.



When local companies support the RNLI (by donating a prize for your raffle, for example), it's understandable that you'll want to thank them through your social media profiles, but be wary of posting what is essentially just free advertising – think about what your subscribers will find interesting, amusing or useful; they are likely to be cynical or turned off by too much 'marketing speak'.

What should I avoid?

Never publish confidential information on the internet. Think carefully before posting details of a sensitive shout – how would the casualty's family feel if they read it? Can you verify every last detail? Never speculate – only ever post what you categorically know to be true and are happy for the world to know.

Never criticise rescuees – gripes like this are for the crew room, not the internet. The RNLI prides itself on being a non-judgemental organisation; those in need of rescue are less likely to call for help if they think they're likely to be ridiculed on Facebook afterwards.

Never criticise other organisations – it's inappropriate and unprofessional. It's always sensible to consider how a journalist could interpret your words, pictures or footage before posting them.

How do I let people know we're here?

There are lots of ways to promote your online profile: add links to your social media profiles on your website, if you have one, and to your email signature; promote it in newsletters and on event posters ('You can keep up to date with Littletown RNLI news on Facebook'). Skegness RNLI has even created a leaflet to let people know about all the ways they can keep in touch online with what's going on at the station: a great way to raise awareness.

What do I do when someone posts an unfavourable comment?

Don't discredit an occasional negative comment – people are entitled to their opinions. See it as an opportunity to start a dialogue and convert new supporters. If factually incorrect information about the RNLI is posted by others, use your judgement to decide whether or not to correct it. There is a balance between being helpful to the discussion and being seen as a 'nitpicker'.

What do I do when someone posts an offensive comment?

If someone has written something offensive or abusive on your page, however, you are well within your rights to remove it – in fact, you probably should. Most social networks have their own terms and conditions, which take a firm stance against offensive language and behaviour. Post an explanation as to why the comment was deleted.



You might consider adding a statement to your profile along the lines of: 'Offensive or abusive comments will be removed and repeat offenders may be blocked. Please remember that children subscribe to this account.'

A fellow volunteer or colleague has posted something inappropriate – what do I do?

Under no circumstances should you attempt to address the problem online. Remove the offending post and explain (privately) to your colleague why you've done so. Hopefully they will understand your reasoning and the implications for our charity's reputation.

If there is conflict of opinion, however, you may need to raise the matter with someone senior who can help you, such as your local lifeboat operations manager or community fundraising manager.

Remember: you and your colleagues are representing the RNLI, not just your station or branch. This reflects on everyone who volunteers and works for the charity.

Always endeavour to show the RNLI in the very best light.

4 Communicating with children online

Communication between children and adults, by whatever method, should take place within clear and explicit professional boundaries.

UK Government guidance states:

'Adults should not share any personal information with a child or young person. They should not request, or respond to, any personal information from the child/young person. Adults should ensure that all communications are transparent and open to scrutiny.' [Source: *Guidance for Safer Working Practice for Adults Working with Children and Young People* – January 2009]

How should I communicate with children on Facebook?

- It isn't advisable to become 'friends' with children through your personal Facebook profile or exchange private messages (don't, for example, talk to children on Facebook Chat).
- Try to keep all conversations on a Facebook page, group or event 'wall', where they can be seen by other users.

A common-sense approach should be adopted at all times when communicating with children online. To avoid any possible misinterpretation of your motives, be careful with your wording when talking to children – be clear and avoid sarcasm.

On the internet, you don't always know whether you're talking to a child or not – so treat all interactions as if you were. This doesn't mean addressing everyone as if they were

8 years old, but ensuring that all communications are transparent and open to scrutiny, and that no personal information is exchanged, such as your home address, for example.



If you are using your personal Facebook profile (as opposed to a separate one used for RNLI purposes), set your privacy settings to maximum. The content you share with your friends in a personal capacity might not be appropriate for children who are fans of your lifeboat station Facebook page.

What if a child contacts me?

If a child or young person asks to make contact with you outside of Facebook (for example, to enquire about a visit to the lifeboat station), ask them to get a parent to make contact through an official RNLI number or email address (for example, the lifeboat station).

What about photos and videos of children?

Consent from parents or guardians and agreement from the child or young person should always be sought before a photo or video is taken for any purpose. When seeking this agreement, be clear about how the photo will be used – parents may be happy to see their child's picture in a fundraising leaflet, but perhaps not on the internet.

Care should be taken to make sure that both child and parent understand the implications of the image or footage being taken, if it's to be used on the internet (on social media sites, for example).

Unless you have clear written consent from a parent or guardian, don't upload photos or videos of children to the internet.

You must ensure that children are appropriately dressed in any photo or video that is uploaded – never upload a picture of a child in their swimming costume without clear written consent from a parent.

The RNLI does not encourage you to use your personal mobile phone to take photos or video, especially when taking photographs or video of children and young people. If you have access to an RNLI camera then please use that.

Further guidance can be found in the RNLI's Volunteer Child Protection Policy, which is available on Porthole. More information about film and images for RNLI use can be found in the RNLI's Camera Guide, which can be ordered through SAP.

5 Useful terms

Social media

Social media are the digital tools that people use to tell and share their stories – such as text messaging, blogs, videos and social networking sites like Facebook.

These tools have brought about a revolution in communication: a shift from one-way communication (for example TV and newspapers) to two-way, peer-to-peer communication online.

Blog

Short for 'web log', a blog is a platform that allows an author (a blogger) to publish content online – this might be in the form of a diary entry or similar to a traditional newspaper column. Other people can leave comments on these blog posts. Millions of blogs exist on the internet, on topics from gardening to Hollywood gossip – this section of social media is often called the 'blogosphere'. You can search for blogs using blog search engines such as Technorati or create your own blog using tools like Blogger.

Facebook

See social networks.

Forum

Forums can be thought of as online messageboards where participants can post discussion topics and others can reply or comment. Forums exist across the internet to serve a wealth of interests. The Scuttlebutt forum on Yachting Monthly's website is popular with sailors – they share advice and anecdotes and debate topics of interest.

Link

See URL.

Microblog

Microblogs are similar to blogs but content is restricted to a very small number of characters. A well-known microblog is Twitter, which only allows users to publish posts of up to 140 characters.

Multimedia

Multimedia simply means more than one digital medium. For example, a multimedia blog could be a blog with video and photos as well as text-based content. Multimedia content tends to be a lot more engaging than just text on its own. Online video sharing sites include YouTube; online photo sharing sites include Instagram and Pinterest.

Search engine

Search engines index and rank websites to help internet users find relevant content through keyword searches – for example Google.

Social network

A social network is an online community of individuals who are connected to one another – sometimes through a shared interest; sometimes because they already know each other offline; sometimes as a business connection. The larger social networks, such as Facebook and LinkedIn, serve a wide variety of interests and geographic areas; other social networks can be very small – Facebook began as a social network for Harvard University students.

Twitter

See microblog.

URL

URL stands for Uniform Resource Locator and is, quite simply, a web address – RNLI.org for example. You may also hear a URL referred to as a link.

Viral

You may have heard the expression 'That video went viral!' This means the organic and rapid spread of online content caused by word of mouth. If a friend sends you a link to a funny video on YouTube via email, you may then email it on to your own friends and family via email.

Wiki

A wiki is a website that can be easily edited by many people simultaneously. Wikipedia is an online encyclopaedia that is edited in this way – anyone can publish or edit content on the site (subject to Wikipedia's terms and conditions).

6 Guidelines for using photos

Operational guidelines

- Does the picture of the lifeboat or lifeguard actually relate to the station or lifeguard unit in question?
- Is the branding of the lifeboat or lifeguard asset correct? Regional or national flags must not be flown in place of the RNLI house flag.
- Are the crew wearing appropriate lifejackets? Are all straps correctly fitted?
- Are the lifeboat crew wearing helmets when onboard an inshore lifeboat (ILB) or casualty vessel?
- Are crew hanging on/strapped in at the rear of an all-weather lifeboat (ALB) or strapped in/secure and facing forward at the front of an ALB?
- No crew should be standing inside/in-line with a stretched tow rope or have feet inside a coil of rope.
- Are the A-frame and hatches secure/closed when an ALB is in motion?
- Are the crew positioned safely aboard the lifeboat in relation to the weather conditions? No crew should be at the front of an ALB in rough weather.
- Are the crew of an ILB seated correctly (no sponson riding)?
- Are the numbers of crew onboard correct for the class of lifeboat?
- Are the propellers in the water? Does it look like a safe operation?
- Are the navigation lights on in dull or dark conditions?
- Is the engine of the ILB locked down?
- Are the hull and superstructure clean and tidy?

Copyright guidelines

Please credit the photographer in all uses where possible. If no information is held, please credit RNLI.

If in any doubt whatsoever, please ask the Film and Image Unit at RNLI Headquarters (see contacts section at the end of this guide).

7 Contacts for support and advice

- Social Media team: 01202 663185 social@rnli.org.uk
- Film and Image Unit: 01202 663353 images@rnli.org.uk.

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