The background features a collage of social media icons and animal silhouettes. The icons include Instagram, LinkedIn, YouTube, and Twitter. The animal silhouettes include a cat, a sheep, a dog, and a cow. A prominent yellow silhouette of a dog is sitting in the center, looking up. The text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

SOCIAL MEDIA GUIDE FOR VETERINARIANS

Brought to you by the New Zealand Veterinary Association
(NZVA) and the Veterinary Council of New Zealand (VCNZ)



This social media guide has been written exclusively for veterinarians and in line with the Code of Professional Conduct (COPC). It provides tips on responsible social media use and aims to keep you professionally safe in your role as a veterinarian. It's also intended to help you navigate the minefield that is social media.

Whether you're working in clinical practice, government, industry, or academia, we hope you'll find this guide useful. If you haven't already initiated the use of social media in your professional life, this might be just the kick start you need.

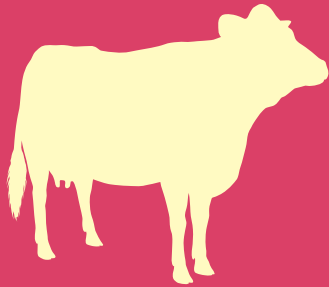


VETERINARY COUNCIL
OF NEW ZEALAND
Te Kaitiaki Raua Kararehe o Aotearoa

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1



THE BASICS

Getting started...

WHAT IS SOCIAL MEDIA?

Social media are web-based platforms that allow people to connect, communicate and interact online in real time to share and exchange information.



The social media landscape is a rapidly changing environment. Currently, popular social media tools include:



Facebook



Twitter



LinkedIn



Blogs

As well as content sharing platforms like:



YouTube



Pinterest



Instagram



Discussion forums



Message boards

And of course there are many more like Vine, Google+, Vimeo, Viddler, Flickr, Foursquare, Meetup, Myspace, Tumblr, Stumbleupon...



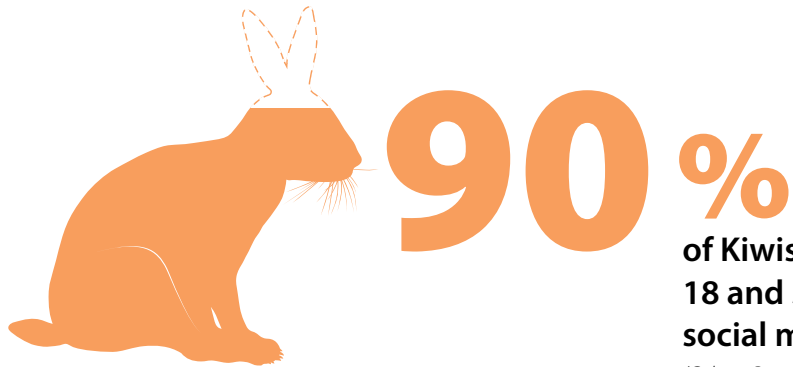
WHY USE SOCIAL MEDIA?

When social media is used correctly it can act as a **valuable marketing tool** to help **improve exposure** to your business and brand. Social media opportunities and its popularity have expanded rapidly in recent years.

Social media can offer many professional, educational and personal opportunities. These can include increased and enhanced communication with colleagues and clients, networking, discussion, professional development, and self-marketing opportunities.

THE STATS

ACCORDING TO SOCIALMEDIA.ORG.NZ



of Kiwis between 18 and 39 now use social media

(Colmar Brunton research, July 2013)

Facebook alone reaches



of 35–54 year olds in a typical month

(Nielsen Online Ratings, September 2013)

Social media engagement and online word of mouth communication increases every year. It plays an important role in consumer decision making, and how we interact with the world.



Kiwis use social media for recommendations

of buying decisions are made by researching the web for recommendations and information

(Localist, November 2013)

Older audiences can be found on social media too



use social media

(Colmar Brunton research, July 2013)

HAVE A PURPOSE/STRATEGY

Ask one key question of yourself/your practice when considering using social media:

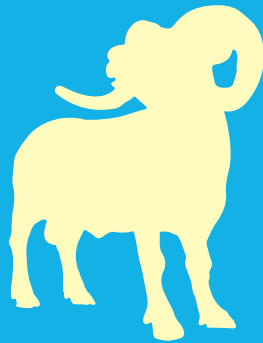
 “What is the **COMPELLING REASON** for me/my business to create a social media presence?”

Just as you would with any new communications strategy, it is important to assess your goals, risks, benefits, and audiences before you decide to invest time and other resources into a social media project. If your answer is simply, “Because we want to be on Facebook”, you will need to consider your social media objectives more thoroughly.

Some important considerations:

1. **What are you hoping to achieve** by investing time and resources into social media?
2. **Who is your audience** and what social media tools are they using? Research from Nielsen Online Ratings suggests that Facebook is the most popular platform; however a survey of your clients might offer a more accurate portrayal.
3. **Do you** (or someone within your practice) **have the skills, time, and resource** to support this project?

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THE PLATFORMS

Being smart about social media platform choices

BE EFFICIENT AND FOCUSED

Don't overcommit – it is better to use one social media channel well, than to use all of them inconsistently.

You will be much more successful if you pick the one platform that is likely to get you the best results (for veterinary practices, that is most likely Facebook).

Key is to focus on keeping your followers engaged and your content fresh.

WHICH PLATFORM SHOULD I USE?



The social media platform(s) you should use will **depend on what you're trying to achieve**, who your core customer group is, and what platform they are using.

By knowing where your customers maintain a presence, you can promote your services using the most appropriate site. Each social media platform has certain attributes that may be more valuable for achieving the objectives of your business' social media project.

Overview of different platforms



Facebook is considered an ongoing relationship builder. It can help you directly interact with clients and potential clients while simultaneously spreading the word about veterinary care and services. Facebook also allows for targeted advertising (e.g. by city), based on the information users provide in their profiles.



Twitter updates people in the "here and now". It is less about social connections and more about staying informed. For most veterinarians and practices, this may be more helpful as a supplement to Facebook. It can help drive traffic to your Facebook page or website.



LinkedIn is mainly used for professional networking on a one-to-one basis. It could be valuable for you as a veterinarian to use this platform to connect with other veterinarians and associated industries' practitioners, and to share industry information. It's also a popular staff recruitment tool, and can provide opportunities for your own professional development.



YouTube is a video sharing service on the internet that allows users to watch videos posted by others and upload videos of their own. This could be a good supplement to using another social media tool, like Facebook. By incorporating video into your online marketing mix you will provide your audience with an added level of engagement that is entertaining. You might share videos that you've created, or other fun pet-related videos that you find online.



Pinterest and Instagram are more appropriate to use for businesses for which visual imagery is a main feature or selling point, such as interior decorating or fashion. Benefits of these platforms are less apparent in the veterinary industry.

Forums and message boards are where forum members can post discussions and read/respond to posts by other members. Forum topics are varied. A forum can be focused on nearly any subject. Often they are used by consumers to recommend and/or discuss products and services. They are also frequently used in academic environments. (e.g. *www.vin.com*, a membership-based Veterinary Information Network)

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IN PRACTICE



How should I use it? Practical guide on social media use.

OPPORTUNITIES AND RISKS

Messages that need to be disseminated quickly to clients (and the public) can be effectively communicated via social media owing to the instantaneous nature of these technologies.

For example, in a rural veterinary situation: notifying clients of a disease outbreak such as *Theileria* or encouraging farmer clients in an escalating drought situation to carry out early destocking.

It is also important to be aware of the downside of using social media. Potential risks include breaching client confidentiality, legal liability, causing distress to colleagues, impacting on the public's trust and confidence in the profession, and damaging future employment opportunities.

Veterinarians must be aware of the implications of their actions and maintain professional standards; whether their online activity is able to be viewed by the public, or is limited to a specific group of people.

MANAGING YOUR SOCIAL MEDIA PRESENCE

1. BE CONSISTENT

To avoid conflicting information, opinions, and unsanctioned material, it is advised that only one person in an organisation manages all social media accounts, i.e. Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn, to avoid conflicting information and opinions.



2. TIMELINESS IS KEY

Nothing kills the effectiveness of social media like a late post or slow response. It is generally expected by the public that posts will be replied to quickly and not ignored. It is not advised to wait 2–3 days or more to respond to social media contact, nor is it beneficial for your social media presence if each and every statement, post or tweet needs to go through a time-consuming, chain-of-command approval process.



3. DEVELOP A SOCIAL MEDIA POLICY

If your practice/employer decides to engage in social media, it should develop its own policy for internal use, making staff rules clear. Much of the guidance listed here can be used in a policy.

4. PRIVACY SETTINGS

Some social media sites have privacy settings that allow users to control and put restrictions on who has access to their personal information. However, the default settings on such sites often let various types of content be shared beyond an individual's network of friends. You should familiarise yourself with the privacy provisions for different social media applications, adopt conservative settings where these are available, and adjust the settings to ensure their content is protected to the extent you would like.



MAINTAINING PROFESSIONALISM



1. SOCIAL MEDIA CAN EXPOSE YOU TO SCRUTINY IN A VERY PUBLIC WAY

Awareness and careful consideration about maintaining appropriate social boundaries between your professional and private life is essential. Before you post content on social media:

- View your active profiles from the perspective of how the general public or a future employer might view them, should they search your name online
- Consider separating personal and professional content online



2. MAINTAINING PROFESSIONAL BOUNDARIES

It is likely, particularly in small communities, that veterinarians will have social media followers/friends who may also be clients. You need to be aware of the boundaries that need to be set and the need to maintain professional relationships with clients when treating their animals. In these circumstances your social media interaction needs to be managed carefully.

3. PROFESSIONALISM AND RESPECT

It is not acceptable to post informal, personal or derogatory comments online about colleagues, employers, clients and their animals, and work environments.

4. REPUTATIONAL RISK

You should be conscious of your online image and how it might impact on your professional standing and, by implication, the reputation of the veterinary profession.

5. SUPPORTING YOUR COLLEAGUES

If you observe that a colleague has posted material online that could be professionally damaging to them, discreetly let them know to encourage them to rectify it.



6. EMAIL ADDRESSES CONVEY AN IMPRESSION

Having an unusual email address may be unhelpful. While the use of, for example, lovesource20@hotmail.com or handsomeboy72@gmail.com might be considered acceptable while a student, carry-over into professional veterinary practice is not appropriate.

7. DOMAIN NAME

Invest in a domain name that matches your business, so your email and social media handle all match up – e.g.

web www.bestvets.co.nz

email jim@bestvets.co.nz

twitter @bestvets

LEGAL CONSIDERATIONS

1. CLIENT CONFIDENTIALITY

The professional and legal duty to protect client confidentiality on social media prevents you from discussing clients and patients or posting pictures of procedures, case studies, patients, or sensitive material which may enable patients and clients to be identified without having obtained consent in appropriate situations.



2. SUM OF INFORMATION

In maintaining such confidentiality, you must ensure that any patient or client or situation cannot be identified by the “sum of information” available online. That is, previous social media posts, discussions on other websites, or any publicly available information such as news stories.

3. DECLARE ANY CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

If you post online you must declare any conflicts of interest. If you explicitly promote or endorse a product or service you must declare any financial or commercial relationship with the supplier and be a bona fide user of the product or service.



4. DEFAMATION LAW



This can apply to any comments posted online in a personal or professional capacity. Social media should not be used as a way of disclosing a concern within a professional context such as a “whistle blowing” scenario. Seeking redress through established and appropriate channels, such as VCNZ, with the backing of a professional colleague, is likely to be more effective and consistent with professional practice.

5. WORKPLACE POLICIES

You should be aware of any organisational policies and clauses in your employment agreement which relate to use of social media.

KEY ADVICE AROUND POSTING

1. PERMANENCE

All social networking sites should be considered to be public and permanent. Irrespective of the intent at the time of posting, or the stringency of your privacy settings, information circulated on social media may end up in the public domain and remain there.

2. DELETED INFORMATION CAN BE FOUND

Once information has been posted online it can remain traceable, even if you later delete it.

3. ONCE POSTED, YOU RELINQUISH CONTROL

You must understand that you cannot control what others will do with any content you put up on social media platforms. This includes sharing your posts, comments, photos, etc., with those you may deem to be undesirable recipients (such as a competitor).



4. RIGHT OF REPLY

Social media is a two-way form of communication. Users of social media should not expect to say something online without right of reply from their audience.



5. DON'T DELETE NEGATIVE POSTS

Take any disputes into private/direct messaging (or ask for the user to email you), or take it offline by requesting phone contact. Deal with a complaint as you would any other – with dignity and respect of potential repercussions. When an issue is resolved, post a reply to the original negative comment, detailing the positive outcome or resolution.



4

CODE OF PROFESSIONAL CONDUCT



For Veterinarians

VCNZ has set out principles and standards to guide professional behaviour in its **Code of Professional Conduct** (COPC) for veterinarians.

The following sections of the COPC have particular relevance to the use of social media.

PRINCIPLE 2. CLIENT RELATIONSHIPS

Veterinarians must practice in a way that promotes effective communication, trust, meets confidentiality, and consent requirements and recognises clients' right to choose. Specifically:

Section 1(b): *Treating all client information and information related to the provision of veterinary services as the private information of the client (except in certain specific circumstances).*

EXAMPLE

Jane, a veterinarian, participates in an online veterinary discussion group where cases are reviewed and discussed. She posts the records of a recent equine case which she has referred on to a more experienced colleague who also participates in the group. She did not remove identifying details and did not obtain the client's consent. Her colleague mentions in passing to the client that his horse's condition and prognosis were the subject of much robust discussion amongst the online group. The client complains to the Privacy Commissioner and VCNZ.

In this instance, Jane could have removed all potential identifiers of the client – client name, location, animal name etc. – and obtained consent from the client for his/her case to be discussed externally with this explicit de-identification. If Jane had followed these suggestions, she would not have breached Principle 2.

PRINCIPLE 3. PROFESSIONAL RELATIONSHIPS

Veterinarians must interact with colleagues honestly and with respect and in a way that fosters good relationships and communication. Specifically:

Section 6: *Veterinarians must treat colleagues with professionalism and respect and not make malicious or unfounded criticisms of colleagues that may undermine the public's trust and bring discredit to the veterinary profession.*

EXAMPLE

John, a veterinarian, joins a discussion thread on a public chat site using a pseudonym. He warns against using a particular veterinary clinic and makes derogatory comments about the competence and professionalism of the veterinarians who practice there. The practice principal concerned identifies John from a post he made the previous week, and lays a complaint with VCNZ.

In such a case, John should have refrained completely from his comments on this thread. Alongside breaching Principle 3, Section 6 through public defamation, he has potentially harmed the reputation of the veterinary profession as a whole.

PRINCIPLE 4. PROFESSIONAL INTEGRITY

Veterinarians must act in a manner that promotes the public's trust and confidence in the profession. Specifically:

Section 1: *Veterinarians must display high standards of integrity and accountability.*

Section 9: *When promoting services and products veterinarians must act fairly by representing their capability and competence accurately and must not... overstate their skills and knowledge by using misleading descriptors.*

EXAMPLE

Anna, a veterinarian, manages the Facebook page of the clinic for which she works. There are no specialist veterinarians at her clinic. She posts statements on the clinic's Facebook page such as "the most experienced vets in town" and "specialist care for your special pet". A specialist from a neighbouring clinic sees the Facebook posts and lays a complaint with VCNZ for misleading advertising and misuse of the term specialist.

Rather than using a superlative such as "most experienced", Anna should have reworded her statement to something more definitive, such as "Our vets have 50 years of combined experience" (if the clinic had five veterinarians on staff, each with 10 years' experience). There are legal and professional requirements around the use of the "specialist" title and those who misuse it risk prosecution and a fine. Anna could have said "high quality care", which carries no connotations of specialist registration.

*Other examples from **Principle 4**. Specifically:*

Section 3: *Veterinarians must identify, declare and manage conflicts of interest so as to demonstrate that they are acting with impartiality and independence.*

Section 9: *When promoting services and products veterinarians must act fairly by representing their capability and competence accurately and must not exaggerate any claim or comparison of the service or product over another.*

EXAMPLE

A client posts a comment on Anna's practice's Facebook page, asking which flea treatment is best for her cat. Anna replies, "FRONTLINE" and adds, "It works for longer than all other products on the market".

Anna needs to tailor her advice to the particular circumstances of the case, which may be difficult when responding to a social media post. Without all of the background details she should have refrained from giving online veterinary advice. She could have mentioned the various options available, and, encouraged the client to contact her to discuss more fully in order that she might make a specific recommendation.

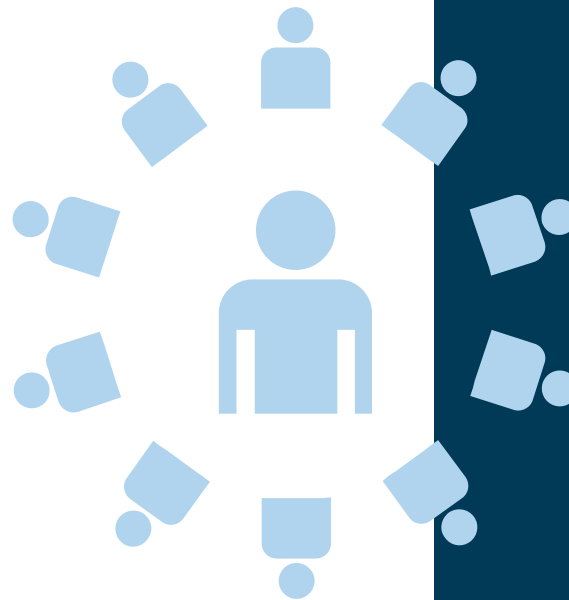
SAFEGUARDING YOURSELF IN THE DIGITAL WORLD

Upon release into the public sphere, social media posts can become a central medium for controversy. It is advised that veterinarians, when using social media in both professional and personal capacities, take every step to avoid controversial ramifications from their posts.

With social media growth comes user responsibility. As your pages attract more followers you gain increased exposure and influence – and are therefore at risk of more critique and criticism.

There is much temptation to use social media to comment on current affairs, including political, economic and social issues. While doing so can be an engaging way of utilising new technologies, many users find themselves in trouble after (intentionally or unintentionally) posting inflammatory comments.

Because veterinarians are often mainstays of their communities, and are held in high regard, there is a professional expectation that they remain non-confrontational and objective.



This guide draws from guidelines for social media documents prepared by the New Zealand Psychologists Board, Nursing Council of New Zealand, Pharmacy organisations of New Zealand, New Zealand Teachers Council, Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency, the British Medical Association, SocialMedia.org.nz, Forbes, Being Your Brand, and SocialMediaGovernance.com.