



Social Media Communication Challenges and Tips

by Gloria Thomas



Use these 12 tips to be confident that your social media messages are authentic, clear and connected.

- 1 Imagine your fellow humans** who will read your post or tweet. Picture each face. They're imperfect, just as you are. Like you, they feel love, joy, hurt, pain, fear—the full range of emotions. What you share on Facebook or Twitter will likely interrupt a busy conversation that's happening in their minds and hearts. Ask yourself, *What impact do I want to have?*
- 2 Reveal the best of yourself.** Share your most constructive ideas and insights to influence, laugh, inspire, encourage, connect and find like-minded friends. Make your interactions as good as your face-to-face communication. Be respectful, grateful, generous, supportive, concerned and kind. Say *thank you* to those who share something you enjoy. Lift others' spirits, even those with whom you disagree.
- 3 Fact check and commit to the truth.** Take responsibility for the information you share as an ethical journalist would by checking three distinct, reliable outlets. Avoid tweeting anecdotes with no data. If you suspect a story is a myth or urban legend, check www.snopes.com or other fact-checking sites. This is especially important when sharing historic or current events. Myths can become viral long before a correction even takes root. You don't want to be guilty of spreading lies, distortions or propaganda. If you do share a false story, quickly post or tweet an apology or correction.



- 4 **Question assumptions.** Examine all sides of issues, including views that are diametrically opposed to yours. Interrogate your prejudices, investigate new angles to dig deeper and learn more. This will help you to overcome confirmation bias, where you might tend to look only at information that supports your beliefs. It will enrich your life to consider other views, whether on history, culture or current events. (Of course, there will be extremists—try to avoid contact with these individuals or groups.)
- 5 **Avoid generalizations and narrow perspectives.** Check your accuracy whenever you use *all*, *everyone*, *nobody*, *every* or any term or phrase that broad-brushes groups. Instead, learn from those you encounter in social media, share stories and treat each person as a unique individual. If you're growing and expanding your horizons, your beliefs may change as blind spots are discovered and discarded.
- 6 **Refrain from too much self-centered broadcasting.** Consider how you can build connections with creative community outreach. If you're sharing a music or movie clip, invite others to post their favorites. When you share photos, think how you might expand the context by adding helpful information. If presenting a picture of restaurant food, write and tag a brief review to help the owner or manager. With a picture of a home-cooked meal, include a link to the recipe.
- 7 **Steer clear of haters.** Don't hide behind your semi-anonymity to join any of the knee-jerk choruses of savage, hateful, harsh anger you'll encounter. If you unleash rage, you might momentarily feel a rush of power and superiority. Yet that rush will be fleeting and corrosive to your well-being.
- 8 **Believe the best.** Avoid assuming bad intentions when you read something that provokes you to react. Consider that it may have been hastily written. Perhaps the sharer was tired. Give them the same benefit of the doubt you'd like to receive. We judge ourselves by our intentions, yet we judge others by their words or actions. For example, some atheists react angrily if offered a prayer for an illness or sorrow they've posted. I hope in a case like this, a sincere gesture can simply be accepted or ignored. Lower your stress and make social media a kinder place by letting more things go and moving on.
- 9 **Request clarification before reacting.** You'll sometimes read a comment and be unclear about the writer's intention. You might think they're angry with you or criticizing you. Instead of reacting defensively, opposing the comment or arguing, simply respond, *I'm not sure I get what you're saying. What do you mean when you say*, [restate their comment or the confusing part of it]? Then wait for a reply. Time spent cooling down often helps.
- 10 **Target anger wisely.** If the energy of anger is to work for us, it must be aimed at issues, not at individuals. Dehumanizing and devaluing fellow humans opens an avenue for hate and horrors. What happens in social media spills into the three-dimensional world. All who participate in this toxic use of language add to the negativity so often associated with these platforms. Use the energy of your anger to point out issues such as injustice, hunger, disease, violence, homelessness and racism. Let's tear down obstacles and barriers that stand in the way of progress. While doing so, demonstrate your love and support for those who provide solutions.



- 11 Commit to improving your writing skills.** Social media platforms provide an ideal space to work on concise, clear, focused writing. Be precise. A post or a tweet can effectively convey only one topic. To paraphrase Robert Louis Stevenson, *Write not to be understood. Write so you can't possibly be misunderstood.* View your longer messages as rough drafts. Pause before clicking reply, post or tweet. Read aloud to listen for errors and unclear language. Think how your words will be received. Make changes as needed. Pause once more to ask yourself: *Can this be clearer? What might I cut? Should I break it into two messages?*
- 12 Inform, entertain and connect.** Bring your unique background, education, experience, hobbies, activities and interests to your tweets and posts. Social media need not divide us or bring out our worst. Even before the 2020 pandemic lockdown, we were in an isolating time. Facebook and Twitter have the potential to bring us together. We can't blame the platform that provides the space for how we *choose* to communicate. We, the people, must take responsibility for our words. It's up to us to use these powerful tools well, to elevate our discourse, have fun and make social media platforms gathering places where we feel safe to learn, grow and connect.

