

AFS-USA Volunteer Social Media Policy: Guidelines for Online Engagement

We know that AFS-USA Volunteers are very passionate about advancing the AFS mission. Volunteers make the world a better place through their efforts across the United States. We believe in open communication, and we encourage volunteers to tell the world about their volunteer experience and passion. However, social media and online communication are changing the way that everyone interacts, including with host families, students, and communities.

AFS-USA is committed to ensuring that volunteers engage with social media responsibly by demonstrating positive behavior that is not detrimental to themselves, other users, or to the organization's reputation. Please review the guidelines below for practical advice about engaging online as an AFS-USA Volunteer.

Who are these guidelines for?

These guidelines are for all AFS-USA Volunteers who participate in social media or online communication, including personal blogs and other websites, Instagram, Facebook, Facebook Workplace, LinkedIn, Twitter, YouTube, TikTok, Snapchat, or others. These guidelines apply to online activity on one's own sites/accounts and on sites/accounts of others.

Best Practices

As a representative of AFS-USA, a volunteer's online activity can have an impact on AFS-USA's reputation. We ask that all AFS-USA Volunteers understand and follow these guidelines:

- 1) Be a friend to AFS by engaging with AFS accounts by liking, sharing, and commenting on posts. Add value to the conversation about the important work that we do, protecting the interests of AFS, our participants, and our stakeholders.
- 2) Use common sense and abstain from posting content that is unlawful, obscene, harmful, threatening, abusive, harassing, defamatory, vulgar, libelous, invasive of another's privacy, or hateful. Behavior that demonstrates discrimination based on race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or gender violates AFS-USA's values.
- 3) It is recommended to set your personal accounts to "private" (only your friends/contacts can see your content), especially if you have AFS-USA listed as an organization that you represent as a volunteer. Please remember that even in cases where only your contacts can view your account, the permanence and transferability of anything published or posted online means that there is a possibility that what you have posted may be made visible to a wider audience or taken out of context.
- 4) Understand that perception is reality. In online social networks, the lines between public and private, personal and professional are blurred. By identifying yourself as an AFS-USA Volunteer, you are creating perceptions about your expertise and about AFS. Ensure that all content associated with you is consistent with your role and with AFS values and standards.
- 5) To ensure the privacy of students and host families:
 - a. Abide by regulations set forth by the US Department of State governing J-1 Visa secondary student exchange programs, which prohibit the distribution of incoming student photos and personalized information as a method of recruitment to anyone but fully screened and vetted host families. [More information about AFS-USA's Media Guidelines is available here.](#)
 - b. Never share a student's full name or contact information in posts.
 - c. Never make publicly available any photos of students whose parents have not consented to the use of photos.
 - d. Never tag students in photos.

- 6) Ensure that all host family members have consented to the use of their photos on social media before posting photos or videos of them. When communicating with students using social media or other electronic communication, always remember the following guidelines:
 - a. Your message could be saved and shared with others out of context. Out of context, messages can be easily misinterpreted. Always take a moment to reflect on the appropriateness of your message before you click send.
 - b. Include other people in the conversation. Whenever possible, text using group messages rather than one-on-one messages. Group messages—sent to multiple AFS participants and/or adults—are less likely to be interpreted as overly personal or suggestive. In a group text, multiple people will be available to help if anyone shares an inappropriate message, photo, or video.
 - c. Don't overuse texts or social media. Participants might feel uncomfortable if you text or send social media messages too often. Send messages when necessary as related to AFS matters. Otherwise, allow participants to start the conversation.
 - d. Model safe messaging and lead by example. Show participants how to communicate safely using texts and social media. If a participant shares an inappropriate message or photo, remind the participant:
 - i. This type of messaging is not allowed at AFS.
 - ii. Don't put yourself at risk by sharing inappropriate texts or photos. You could draw unwanted attention.
 - iii. Sharing explicit content, even with friends, can have very serious legal consequences in the US.
 - e. When creating local Facebook groups for students or host families, remember to create a closed group rather than a page. This makes your invite-only group private and lessens brand confusion.
 - f. [Click here for the printable "Smart, Safe Texting & Social Media Use" infographic for volunteers and students.](#)
- 7) Just like we tell our students, please remember that the internet never forgets. This means that everything that you publish online can be visible to the world for a very, very long time, and you are responsible for what you post on your own site/account and on the sites/accounts of others.
- 8) Keep in mind that you are a representative of AFS-USA. The [AFS-USA Volunteer Agreement](#) that you signed includes a Code of Conduct that outlines expectations of AFS-USA Volunteers, which includes treating others with respect and acting as an appropriate representative of AFS-USA. Disparaging AFS in an online forum is not appropriate behavior of an organizational representative. A volunteer's association with AFS-USA may be reviewed if their online activity violates the Volunteer Agreement.

This policy may be updated or revised by AFS-USA as needed. Updates and revisions to this policy will be posted on the [Social Media Policy on MyAFS Help & Learning](#) and will automatically be applicable to AFS-USA Volunteers. Questions regarding this policy can be sent to AskAFS@afsusa.org.

Thank you for your volunteer service!