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Electronic media is here to stay: learn how to avoid problems

Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. Emails, Instagram, texts and blog posts. Campers and staff now have more ways than ever to talk about your camp and communicate with each other year-round. It's a reality that's both exciting and more than a little intimidating, given how popular and powerful these channels are — and how difficult they can be to monitor and control.

It's vital to be proactive in this area. Even if you opt not to use electronic and social media, that doesn't mean that your campers and staff won't. The following can help your camp avoid problems involving these communication tools.

Educate yourself, staff, parents and campers

"Electronic channels are 24/7. You can't spend all your time policing, so you've got to educate," said Gabe Chernov, owner and director of Birch Trail Camp in Minong, Wis., who researched and developed social media policies for the Association of Independent Camps. "Don't couch your discussions around the word 'can't' but around 'here's why.' Educate, don't dictate, and people are more likely to do the things you ask."

"I will never be able to teach kids or staff about every single scenario, but if I can convey the spirit of what we're trying to accomplish, they'll have a better chance of knowing when a situation isn't right," said Jennifer Selke, PhD, who's on the faculty at the University of California, Berkeley, affiliated with the Berkeley Center for New Media, and is the director of Strawberry Canyon Youth Programs.

Help staff and campers understand the lifespan of anything they post online — which is potentially forever — and that unless they're very knowledgeable about privacy settings, they could be sharing information with a much broader world than they think. "I tell them to assume that nothing is private," said Selke.

Create a social media team

These are the staff members who monitor and administer your electronic channels and will likely be your point people in the event of negative press or an emergency. Rely on them to keep abreast of changing technology and to ensure your policies and procedures are up to date. Note that seasonal staff should not be used to fill such roles.

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Develop written policies and require sign-offs

Create written policies for electronic media use that reflect current understandings of employment law and free speech and have them reviewed by your legal team. Spell out behaviors that won't be tolerated and consequences if they occur and follow through if they do.

Have parents and staff sign off on your written policies. "This will give you some legal protection if you run into a problem down the road, though it will vary by state," Chernov said. "And know that the legal standards of where an employee is from, not just your camp location, can affect you."

Develop policies for each of the following:

- **Your social media team (including crisis management).**

Spell out the direct responsibilities of your social media team plus crisis steps: who will respond in a crisis — it should generally be someone besides the camp director who will be handling the event — whether the response will be public, whom your camp needs to communicate with (which will likely depend on the type of crisis) and which tools you'll use to get the message out.

"With negative press, staff, campers and families might think they're doing you a favor by going online to defend you," Selke said. "There has to be absolute lockdown: only your social media team should respond. But give the media access to appropriate information instead of forcing them to scrounge for it."

- **Online communities.** If you use Facebook or have a blog, state your posting policies and the consequences of posting crude language, offensive images, etc., on the web page.

- **Camp staff.** The main issues these policies should cover are appropriate interaction with campers (more below) and what staff is allowed to do in relation to the camp brand, such as posting images on their own website or Facebook page or making official statements about camp online.

- **Parents/campers.** Before camp starts, send parents written communication about social networking, cellphones, cameras, cyber bullying and out-of-camp contact between staff and campers. Encourage parents to review this with their child and cover it at camp too.

Restrict one-on-one staff/camper contact

The fun and friendly nature of camp means that staff and campers often form a special bond, but camps should do everything they can to limit one-on-one contact.

"Teach your staff to never be alone with a camper, either physically or virtually," Selke said. "They shouldn't have pictures of campers on their phones or Facebook; they shouldn't text, instant message or email campers; and they

shouldn't 'friend' campers. If everyone understands the rules, campers and staff immediately know when something isn't right, and it gives them permission to report it."

"During the summer, your counselors are generally conscious of being role models; they know campers are their top priority, they're supervised and they have a support network if there's a problem," Chernov said. "When they leave, their priorities are different and so is their mindset. If they've been emailing a camper who shares a deep problem with them (abusive behavior, thoughts of suicide, etc.) that the counselor doesn't know how to handle, ignores or misses, the consequences could be disastrous for everyone."

Chernov cautions counselors to limit contact with campers to the official, public Facebook page, where camp staff can monitor interaction. If a staff member needs to email a camper, copy another adult staff member on the email.

Church Mutual's safety video *Abuse At Camp* discusses additional staff/camper contact concerns as they relate to electronic media. Visit www.churchmutual.com, click "Safety Resources" and select Videos (DVDs).

Be social media savvy

Understand privacy and permissions settings. "Educate yourself or you might be giving away things that you hadn't intended to," Chernov cautioned. "Recognize that privacy and permissions settings for some of the sites — especially Facebook — change all the time. Go to the FAQs if you have questions."

Trademark your camp's name, logo, etc. "It's easy, relatively inexpensive and protects you if someone tries to use your name or logo or set up a website for your camp," Chernov said.

Add disclaimers to your site. Social media disclaimers are typically used to explain that the views of a commenter aren't necessarily the views of the camp. Have your disclaimers reviewed by legal counsel and be sure to monitor all comments on your website, Facebook page, etc. Chernov recommended including a disclaimer in your written policies too, so it's part of the official sign-off by parents and staff.

Limit who controls your online channels. Grant access to the director and the social media team only. "The tighter the controls the better," Chernov said.

Use monitoring tools. Use Google Alerts and Twitter and Facebook searches to find out what people are saying about your camp. "Create a sense of community and ask parents, campers and staff to let you know if they see something about you on social media," Selke said. "You'll be able to leverage good press and address problems more quickly."

- **Resource:** Gabe Chernov and the AIC have created a comprehensive collection of Internet policies for campers, parents and staff. For a sample, contact gabe@birchtrail.com.





Managing Your Risks

Remember the silent killer as you prepare for busy season

Preventing carbon monoxide (CO) poisoning should be a top priority as you gear up for the next busy season. CO exposure often results from the improper installation or maintenance of gas-fired furnaces or heaters. Additional dangers, such as fire and explosion, can also occur because of improper heating system maintenance.

It is extremely important to use the know-how of qualified heating, ventilating and air conditioning (HVAC) service representatives to inspect gas-fired furnaces and heaters to make sure they are maintained in accordance with manufacturers' specifications.

Springtime provides an excellent opportunity for camps — especially those that have been shut down for the winter — to have an HVAC service representative conduct a thorough inspection of every gas-fired heating device. Don't forget gas-fired cooking stoves or ovens, water heaters, clothes dryers and fireplaces too.

Faulty fresh air intake systems, improperly adjusted burners, damaged or corroded heat chambers and exhaust vents and plugged exhaust vents are common contributors to the harmful buildup of CO. Thorough inspections will help detect heating/exhaust system deficiencies before it's too late.

CO and smoke detectors should be installed in accordance with manufacturers' recommendations and/or local laws and regulations. Test them monthly to ensure they are operating properly. Replace batteries per manufacturers' recommendations. If you find your detectors are being tampered with or batteries are being removed, use detectors with tamper-resistant features.

Check the warranty for the life span of the brand and model of each smoke and CO detector used at your facilities. Replace detectors in accordance with manufacturers' instructions. Record the purchase date with a marker on the inside of each detector, so you will know when to replace them.

Edward A. Steele
Risk Control Manager



Seasonal Spotlight

Maintenance staff must have safety mindset

As your camp gears up for its busiest season, repair and maintenance tasks will be top of mind. Safety training, advanced planning and proper equipment are all critical, but one thing is even more important: the right attitude about safety.

"Too many times people think an accident can't happen to them," said Dr. Charles Wallace, director of Lake Logan Episcopal Center in Canton, N.C.

Often, these feelings are exacerbated by camp staffing issues. "If you're short of staff, it's not always easy to find that second person to hold the ladder," Wallace said. "Staff think, 'I'll do it alone, just this time, and it will be OK.' But sometimes, it's not."

What can camps do to change this mindset?

Schedule regular safety training. Staff should receive ongoing training on the following: the appropriate use of safety and personal protective equipment (PPE), proper lifting, measures against Hantavirus, lockout/tagout procedures and best practices for equipment inspection and use. There should also be policies regarding when it's necessary for a second person to be involved in a task — for example, when there's heavy lifting, working on gas lines, in high/tight spaces or on a major truck repair, etc.

Conduct regular inspections of all equipment. Follow manufacturers' recommended maintenance schedules, with additional care if equipment has been used for unusually demanding tasks.

Ensure adequate supplies of safety equipment. Staff need ready access to goggles, safety masks, gloves and other PPE and should wear steel-toe shoes when appropriate.

Wallace also recommended the following:

Have maintenance staff oversee training. "Pick the safety-conscious person on the team who everyone trusts and respects and have them do the training. It will be twice as effective as having administration do it."

Get out from behind your desk. "You've got to be out and about to understand what your staff is dealing with and why they might not take the time or effort to follow your safety training."

Share stories. "People are more willing to listen to stories than lectures. I have one that I like to share about a back injury I suffered. Staff had left expensive tools out in the rain, and I picked up a tank that was much too heavy and fell down a slippery slope. I was young and immortal, I was mad and I paid the price. It's a good story that could happen to anyone."

Model safe behavior. Your actions speak much louder than your words. Make sure you follow your own policies and safety procedures.

Q | A

A Perspective

A new game is popping up alongside camps' soccer fields and basketball courts: gaga. Although gaga (which means "touch, touch" in Hebrew) has been a fixture on the East Coast for nearly four decades, it has only become popular throughout the country in recent years. Part handball, part dodgeball — but without the painful thwacks that dodgeball is known for — gaga is popular with kids of all ages and abilities. Chris Guertin, president of Sport Resource Group, a Minneapolis-based gaga pit manufacturer, shared some highlights of the game.



Risk Reporter: Tell us how the game is played.

Chris Guertin: Typically, 20 to 30 kids are inside an octagon-shaped pit — the shape creates more interesting bounce angles. It's played with a big, soft foam ball that the kids hit with an open hand. The goal is to hit other players with the ball somewhere either below their waists or their knees, depending on players' ages. When you hit other players in this region they're out; if you hit them above the target area, you're out. You're also out if you hit the ball out of the pit or up in the air. The kids leave the pit when they're hit; the game is over when one player is left.

Risk Reporter: Why do you think it's become so popular?

Chris Guertin: It's fast and fun — kids don't equate it with exercise — and anyone can be good at it. There's no advantage for physical size or strength, and it doesn't require any special skills or experience. Even kids with some level of physical limitations can play. It goes really fast: a typical game only takes three or four minutes. If you're out, you know you'll be back soon. The pit is the only equipment, and it takes up little space: for 10 to 15 percent of the space of a basketball court, you get three times as many kids playing in a gaga pit at the same time.

Risk Reporter: Tell us about the pit.

Chris Guertin: Our pits are made of linear low-density polyethylene — the same material as many play structures. The official pit is 26 feet by 26 feet; a junior pit is 22 feet by 22 feet. The pieces interlock like a giant set of LEGO® blocks, and they're easy to assemble/disassemble, though they're fairly heavy. The standard pits cost \$4,500 to \$4,900. Some camps choose to build their own pits, but that often creates additional concerns regarding the safety of the materials used.



Risk Reporter: What factors should be considered when setting up the pit?

Chris Guertin: You need a level surface. Avoid asphalt or concrete surfaces; most camps put the pit on grass. Don't set up in pebbles, sand or mulch — the impact of the ball could send things flying into kids' eyes. Indoors, it's best to set up on a wooden, rubber or plastic floor.

Risk Reporter: Any safety concerns?

Chris Guertin: Before play begins, go over the rules and stress where the ball is allowed to hit. The size of the pit means kids don't tend to build up a lot of speed, lessening the blow if they run into each other. The most typical problem is scraped knuckles. The surface you set up on can help with that. The soft ball also limits injuries. Look for pits that fit together cleanly with no gaps, sharp edges or brackets.