

# Using Social Media to Promote Oral Health: Twitter Messaging



## Social Media: A Fact Sheet

### What is social media and why is it important?

Social media is a form of social interaction/networking where information is created, shared and exchanged in a virtual space through the Internet. Social media offers the ability to share information and connect with a wider audience than traditional means of communication. Social media promotes collaboration, discussion and input from a diverse audience. Additionally, social media is inexpensive – costing little to nothing, and it's widely accessible, with many users accessing applications anywhere and everywhere with mobile devices.

40% of cell phone owners access social media on their phone, with 28% doing it daily. Young people, Black Non-Hispanics, Hispanics, the highly educated and those with a higher annual household income are more likely to use social networking on their phones.

### What is Twitter?

Twitter is one of the social media outlets and is characterized as an information network made up of 140-character messages called “Tweets.” It was launched in July 2006 and has become the second most popular social networking site. It boasts 310 million unique monthly active users, 80% of which are on mobile devices, thus providing an opportunity for almost instant receipt and sharing of oral health messages. Twitter supports 33 languages and 500 million Tweets are sent per day. Twitter’s mission is *to give everyone the power to create and share ideas and information instantly, without barriers.*

### Why should we use Twitter to promote oral health?

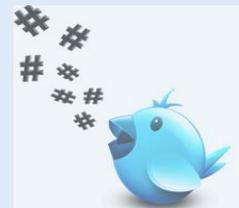
Twitter is a great way to share oral health information about oral health programs, new resources and policy changes. It also allows you to gather real-time information from residents, partners, stakeholders and decision-makers, in addition to building relationships with new partners. Twitter is free to use and allows the opportunity for sharing messages, thus growing your audience exponentially. Twitter also tends to have followers that are thought leaders, bloggers, etc. looking for stories and news. So, Twitter can reach an audience that also has a bigger reach than a single person.

### How do we get started with Twitter?

First, for those in state oral health programs, check with your public information officer to see if you can establish a program social media account - you'll never know if you don't ask! If that isn't an option, ask about using their account to Tweet (almost 100% of state health departments are using social media). Local programs can check with your administrators. Also check with your state's oral health coalition – it's their purpose to promote oral health, and the majority use social media.

### WHAT'S A HASHTAG?

A hashtag is a word or an unspaced phrase preceded by the pound sign (#) and used to identify messages on a specific topic, similar to a keyword or phrase. It draws attention to what is being posted, and a search for the hashtag returns the set of messages that contain it. Hashtags may be inserted at the end of a Tweet or they may be incorporated into the body of the Tweet. Examples include: #TEETH, #2thbrush, and Always use a #fluoride toothpaste.



## How do we compose a Tweet?

The first thing you'll want to remember is that all Tweets can be no more than 140 characters in length, including the hashtag (#) – no worries though, Twitter counts the characters for you. The shorter the Tweet the better, and the catchier the headline, the more people will read it. Be sure that your Tweet has one main theme; don't mix messages... it can be confusing. To make the Tweet even more interesting or to provide added information, consider adding a photo, video or link. Also consider leaving some space (characters free) so that your followers can retweet your message.

## What is retweeting?

Retweeting is the reposting of someone else's Tweet; it helps to spread the message among your followers, their followers and subsequent followers. It's important to *promote* that you are using social media – the more followers you have the greater the opportunity for the oral health message to have a wider reach.

## Are there other considerations we should plan for?

Developing an appropriate strategy for incorporating social media into the oral health program's communication plan is useful to secure success, though it needn't be complicated. Answering the following questions is a good starting point.

### ***Q: What type of information will you share? Who will develop your oral health messages?***

**Tips:** No special training is needed. Remember, simple messages are best. Also, consider that other organizations have composed messages that you can use. ASTDD, in collaboration with the Children's Dental Health Project, frequently provides messages that oral health programs can use. Don't forget, retweeting an appropriate message is also an option.

### ***Q: Who will be the point person for maintaining the Twitter account or communicating with whoever is posting your messages?***

**Tips:** Assigning one person to be responsible for coordinating the messaging limits the potential for confusion. This person need not be experienced in communication; consider someone in your program who enjoys using social media for personal use.

### ***Q: How often will you Tweet – daily, several times each week, or just during special events?***

**Tip:** The more active you are, the more recognizable you will become as a credible resource to others.

### ***Q: Too busy to Tweet?***

**Tip:** Consider using a free service to schedule your Tweets at predetermined dates and times. To do this you can use Hootsuite, FutureTweets and even Twitter itself.

## TWITTER USERNAMES



Twitter signifies a username, sometimes called a "Twitter handle," with the @ symbol. This symbol is also used in Tweets when you want to draw the attention of another user to a specific Tweet and/or if you want to mention a specific Twitter user in the Tweet. Usernames are limited to 15 characters. For example: *Congratulations @stateleader34 you've been named our #oralhealthhero.* OR *@stateleader34 We'll be announcing our #Oralhealthhero this Friday.*