

# Social Media Basics for Conservation Organizations



*Organizations can enhance and expand their conservation impact by using social media to engage new and existing supporters.*

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## About This Guide

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Though land trusts are the primary intended audience of this guide, most of the information is applicable to a broad range of organizations, including trail groups, municipal parks departments, and watershed associations.

This guide describes strategies, practices, and terminology that will likely remain relevant and accurate for some time; nevertheless, significant changes to the social media platforms discussed may render specific guidance outdated.

## The Benefits of Using Social Media

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Millions of people use social media on a regular basis to communicate with friends, access news, and follow topics of interest. While younger people tend to be more active on social media, older Americans are using social media sites, especially Facebook,<sup>1</sup> in increasing numbers. Because of this, a great many companies and organizations—including land trusts—use social media accounts to enhance their internet presence. For many, social media accounts have become just as important as more traditional tools like websites and email lists.

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<sup>1</sup> A [2016 Pew survey](#) found that 67% of American internet users over the age of 50 use Facebook (compared to 88% of

Usually, organizations have accounts on multiple social media platforms so they can reach the widest possible audience. This guide focuses on the most prominent of the many platforms in use: [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), and [Instagram](#). Creating an account on any of the major platforms is free.

You can use social media to showcase information about your land trust and its work, and, like a website, shape your organization's public image. Unlike websites, social media accounts do not require people to visit them intentionally; your social media posts can show up on the screens of people who have never heard of your organization. This feature makes social media an effective tool for reaching new audiences—especially younger people—who might be interested in conservation but have not sought out your website or subscribed to your email list. From these new audiences can emerge donors, volunteers, event attendees, future staff members, and better-educated citizens. Social media accounts can also help people in your land trust's existing network stay involved, informed, and inspired.

## Time Commitment

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To maintain an effective social media presence, your land trust should expect to devote roughly 1-2 hours per week in staff or volunteer time on the first platform (for content development and posting), and 30 minutes to 1 hour for each additional platform (adapting and posting the same content). However, this can vary greatly depending on the frequency and content of posts.

Many land trusts, especially all-volunteer organizations, find it difficult to make time for social media. This is understandable. However, considering social

internet users ages 18-29). See the full survey results at [http://conservationtools.org/library\\_items/1555](http://conservationtools.org/library_items/1555)

media's potential to help your land trust protect more land and connect more people to the outdoors, you should strongly consider carving out 10-20 minutes a day to maintain at least a Facebook page for your organization since 79% of American internet users are on Facebook, compared to 32% on Instagram and 24% on Twitter.<sup>2</sup> If time allows, you can consider expanding to other platforms.

If you decide that your land trust truly does not have the necessary time to devote to social media, it is better to have no accounts than to have poorly managed ones. Having no accounts makes an organization less visible, but having poorly managed accounts could actually hurt your image.

(On Facebook, an unmanaged page for your organization may have been created automatically. See the "Facebook" section for more information.)

## Key Terms

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Below are definitions of key terms used in this guide that apply to Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Platform-specific terms are defined in the sections covering each platform.

### Engagement

Engagement consists of a user interacting with a post by reacting to it, commenting, sharing or retweeting it, or clicking on a link. (On Twitter and Instagram, liking is the only available reaction. Facebook offers additional, more nuanced reactions: users can click emotions that correspond to happiness, sadness, anger, surprise, and laughter.)

This action appears on that user's account, exposing the account that published the post to that user's followers.

### Follow

An individual or organization follows an account by clicking the "follow" button on that account's profile. When users log into the site, their screen (known as the feed) is full of posts from the accounts they follow. Essentially, followers are your primary audience on social media.

There is no agreed-upon understanding of what following signifies. Some people do not necessarily view following an account as an endorsement of that account, especially on Twitter where many users follow accounts primarily to stay informed (for example, it's not uncommon for advocacy organizations to follow politicians who are hostile to their cause). However, following is also a way to display support for people, groups, and causes; therefore, some people equate following with support. Because of this, some organizations choose to not follow any potentially controversial accounts.

### Hashtag

A hashtag is a word or phrase preceded by the # symbol that is used to identify and group posts on a specific topic. When people click on a hashtag or type it in the platform's search bar, they will see all the posts that include that hashtag. Anyone can create a hashtag simply by typing a word or phrase after the # symbol. An excessive amount of hashtags can make a post difficult to read.

Example: *Check out these photos from #PLCC2018 in Chester County, hosted by @PALandTrustAssn.*

### Like

Each post has an icon that users click if they like the content. The amount of likes a post receives is one measure of its popularity.

On Facebook, users can also like the pages of organizations, businesses, and other entities they support. If a user likes a page, they also automatically follow that page (they can also follow a page without liking it).

### Mention

Mentioning means including the name of another account in a post, preceded by the @ symbol. This creates a clickable link to that account and notifies the account that it has been mentioned in a post. (On Facebook, the @ symbol doesn't actually appear in the text; on Twitter and Instagram, it does.)

Example: *We had a great time planting trees at our preserve with @PartnerOrganization!*

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<sup>2</sup> Pew.

## Post

A post is something published on a social media account. Facebook posts can be virtually any length and include text, photos, and videos. Twitter posts (known as tweets) can include the same things, but are limited to 280 characters. Instagram posts feature a photo or short video with a caption.

## General Guidelines

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Some general guidelines for effective social media usage hold true across the various platforms.

### Create an Attractive Account

In the “about” section of your social media accounts, describe your land trust’s mission and work in a few well-crafted sentences, not paragraphs. (Your website is a better place for a more extensive description). For the profile picture, use your organization’s logo. Facebook and Twitter also have space for a horizontal banner photo; this is a perfect spot for a photo a preserved property or of people enjoying one of your events. Change the photo periodically to keep your account looking fresh.

Also, be sure to complete the fields that list your location, type of organization, website, phone number, and other information.

### Develop a Distinct Voice

Social media gives you the opportunity to cultivate a distinct online personality that reflects your land trust’s values and culture. Different organizations have different styles, which can shine through in a variety of ways. For example, a land trust that wants to appear fun-loving and casual might use emoticons or post photos of staff members in their Halloween costumes, while a land trust that wants to appear more serious might avoid exclamation marks and restrict posts to more conservation-specific content.

Developing a consistent voice is easiest if one person manages an organization’s social media accounts. If multiple people post on the accounts, maintaining a consistent voice requires good communication and a well-defined set of guidelines for the style and content of posts. Many organizations include these guidelines in their policies and procedures manuals.

## Use More Images and Fewer Words

Due to the dynamic, visual nature of social media, posts with photos or videos will perform better than text-only posts. No matter the platform, every post should have a visual component accompanied by a few well-crafted words that succinctly describe the content and pique the viewer’s interest. Longer blocks of text, especially when not accompanied by a photo or video, tend to perform poorly. Avoid using low-resolution images.

If you have a lot of information to share (for example, announcing a new easement acquisition), don’t create a five-paragraph Facebook post. Instead, publish the full story on your website, then post the hyperlink on Facebook with a photo and brief description.

## Post a Variety of Content

By posting a variety of content, you keep your social media accounts fresh and interesting for different segments of your audience. While it is important to post about your land trust’s achievements, project updates, and event announcements, also consider posting about other things like conservation-related news or the successes of partner organizations. Most land trusts active on social media curate a mix of original content (e.g., event invitations and project photos) and content produced by others (e.g., newspaper stories and web articles).

You can include three basic types of content in a post: hyperlink, photo, and video. Links can—and should—be combined with photos or videos; link-shortening websites like [Bitly](#) make it easy to include a condensed link in the text of a post.

## Interact with Audience

No matter the platform, a primary component of social media is interaction with other people. This interaction happens in a variety of ways: users can like posts, add comments, send messages, vote on polls, and more. These features allow land trusts to answer questions, gather feedback, and engage directly with supporters in real-time, which is difficult on a traditional website. By responding to messages and comments in a timely manner and inviting audience participation (e.g., through polls or caption contests), you can build personal connections and develop your

land trust's reputation as a reliable, helpful source of information.

## Engage with Other Organizations

### Follow

Just like individuals with social media accounts, land trusts can follow the accounts of other organizations and people (and can also like, comment, and message). In addition to fostering connections with other organizations, this is a good way to keep track of conservation news and events. Some organizations follow hundreds of other accounts; others only follow a handful of the most relevant and influential. Either way, bear in mind that the accounts your organization follows will be visible to the public.

### Mention

You can mention another account in a social media post by typing the @ symbol before the name of the account. Mentioning other people and organizations makes for more informative posts: by clicking on the name of the mentioned organization or person, readers are linked directly to that account. If you mention other organizations in your posts, they might reciprocate by mentioning your land trust in a post or sharing one of your posts. Through this exchange, organizations are exposed to new audiences of potential followers.

## Analyze Metrics

Facebook and Twitter have built-in features that allow you to analyze all kinds of data: likes, followers, link clicks, audience demographics, and more. Studying the metrics can help you understand which types of posts perform the best and determine the best times to post. Use a spreadsheet to track and compare key metrics such as followers, engagement rate, and impressions/reach over time.

See [Facebook Insights](#), [Twitter Analytics](#), and [Instagram Insights](#) for more information.

## Pay to Advertise?

You can pay to advertise a particular post (which generates more views and engagements than the post would get organically) or create an ad for your organization itself in order to gain new account followers. You set a total budget and length of time for the ad to

run, and the website automatically allocates the daily spend accordingly. You can target the ad to reach a customized audience based on interests, demographics, and more. For example, a post promoting a trails conference could target hikers, cyclists, and outdoor enthusiasts.

Land trusts and other nonprofits successfully use paid ads in a variety of ways. Some of the most common include:

- Fundraising (e.g., a post asking people to contribute money towards a conservation project)
- Event promotion (e.g., a post inviting people to an upcoming event)
- Grassroots advocacy (e.g., a post encouraging people to tell their legislators about the importance of conservation funding)
- Audience-building (e.g., an ad about your organization and its mission)

For land trusts with tight budgets, spending even \$10 or \$20 to advertise a post about an event or fundraising campaign can drastically increase the number of people who see the post. (Keep in mind, however, that these increased views may not translate into action; the quality of the post and the audience it reaches are major factors.) If possible, organizations should experiment with advertising to find out if it is effective for them.

Learn more about advertising on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), and [Instagram](#).

## Facebook

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### Overview

If your land trust is only going to be active on one social media platform, it should be [Facebook](#). It is by far the most popular social media site and offers the largest variety of features and functions. Having a Facebook page gives you the best chance to make an impact using social media.

In some cases, an unofficial, unmanaged Facebook page may have been automatically created for your

organization or preserves you manage. To claim an unmanaged page, follow [these instructions](#).

Learn more about creating and managing a page at the [Facebook Help Center](#).

## Key Terms

### Comment

Below each post is a comment section where users can add their feedback. Organizations can reply to comments on their own posts and comment on the posts of others.

### News Feed

The News Feed is the screen where posts appear in real-time. Users scroll through the News Feed to view the posts of the accounts they follow. Facebook uses a proprietary algorithm to determine which posts appear in a user's News Feed and how long they stay there; posts with more engagements generally appear in more users' News Feeds. The content of users' News Feeds is also shaped by their engagement behavior—if someone frequently engages with your page's posts, they are more likely to see future posts from your organization.

### Reach

The total number of people or pages who have a particular post appear in their News Feed. Page administrators can see the reach displayed in the bottom left corner of each post, but it is not displayed to the public.

### Share

Reposting content published by another account. Organizations can share posts from other pages; people can share posts by pages or other people. Shares are the means by which posts spread, sometimes like wildfire (when a post's popularity explodes, it has "gone viral.")

### Page

Organizations, businesses, and other entities have Facebook *pages*. Individuals, on the other hand, have *profiles*. When creating an account for your land trust, make sure to create a page, not a profile.

## Creating an Effective Post

Though it is fast and easy to just share another page's post, you should create your own posts the majority of the time, especially if you are posting less frequently. Followers appreciate original posts and usually engage more with them, which increases post reach and, in turn, new followers. A rule of thumb is 70% original, value-added content; 20% shared content; and 10% promotional content.

### Hashtags

If you're posting about a topic for which there are popular hashtags, use one or two (either incorporating them into the wording of the post or listing them at the end). You can also create an original hashtag for a land trust project or event and encourage your followers to use it. Make sure to check out potential hashtags before using them to make sure there are no surprise meanings that could hurt your organization's image. To view posts that include a particular hashtag, type the hashtag into the search bar.

### Mentions

If the post includes the name of another organization, business, or entity with its own Facebook page, use the @ symbol to mention that page.

### Links

When posting a hyperlink to another resource, explain in the post text the resource and encourage followers to click the link. As explained above, fewer words is generally better. Here are some ideas:

- Summarize the key takeaway. Example: *We just acquired an easement on this beautiful 100-acre farm. Learn more here: [link to press release]*
- Describe how the content relates to your work. Example: *@County's newly released comprehensive plan focuses on protecting open space from development. We're here to help. [link to news story]*
- Pose a question. Example: *Recently @LocalOrganization profiled #ExamplePreserve. Which of our preserves is your favorite? [link to web article]*
- Quote a line or two from the piece. Example: *"Studies show that children who play outdoors get better grades in school." #OptOutside [link to study]*

When posting a link, an image from the linked website or article should display automatically. However, with some links this doesn't happen. In that case, or if the auto-generated image is not ideal, manually upload a photo to go along with the link. You can use a link-shortening site like [Bitly](#) to condense the link.

### Photos

When posting a photo with no link, the text is less important. Followers will see the image no matter what, and you aren't trying to entice them to click on anything. A simple caption will work—let the photo tell the rest of the story.

*Example: We had a great time restoring the streambank with volunteers from @LocalClub! [group photo along streambank]*

### Videos

To post a video, you can either upload the video file directly from your computer or post a link to a video from sites like [Youtube](#). Uploaded videos will automatically play when someone scrolls over them in the News Feed, generating more views. Linked videos will appear with an image that viewers must click on to play the video. To entice people to click, you may need to spend a bit more time crafting a clever caption than you would for a photo.

*Example: Jim has been farming for 50 years on land that has been in his family since 1875. Learn why he decided to donate a conservation easement. [video]*

### Events

The Create an Event feature allows you to create a Facebook page for an upcoming event, complete with a description, time and date information, a map, and photos. You can include other Facebook pages as co-hosts, which makes it easy to collaborate with partner organizations or businesses. Facebook users can RSVP to the event and share it like they would a regular post. Most organizations choose to also create a page for the event on their website so that they can share the link via email with non-Facebook users.

### Polls

The Create a Poll feature allows you to poll your audience on a particular topic. You choose the question, possible answers, and time period for the poll to remain open. This can be a helpful tool to receive

feedback and engage your audience. (Keep in mind that the responses tell you only how these particular Facebook users view a matter; results can't be generally and meaningfully extrapolated to a broader group.)

### When to Post?

[Research](#) suggests that 5-15 Facebook posts per week is ideal for most organizations. Fewer than five posts can make it difficult to build an audience; too many posts can appear spam-like, resulting in less engagement or even unlikes (when users opt out of liking your page).

In general, the best times to post are morning, midday, and evening on weekdays, and midday on weekends. However, you can use the Insights tool, which shows when your page's followers are online throughout each day, to optimize your posting schedule. You can schedule posts ahead of time by clicking "schedule" instead of "publish," then choosing a date and time.

### Gaining Followers

If you create effective posts and post regularly, your page should gain followers over time. Facebook also has a feature that allows you to invite people to like your page. Beneath a post, click where it says "X number of people liked this." You will see a list of everyone who liked the post, and next to their names an indication of whether they already like your page. If they don't, you can invite them, and an invitation notification will appear when they log in to their Facebook account.

Using this method, you can expand your audience to include people who have demonstrated an interest in your content.

## Twitter

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### Overview

[Twitter](#) is an effective addition to Facebook and can help your organization reach a wider, slightly younger audience. It is also a good platform for following the press and elected officials. On Twitter, you can share the same content you share on Facebook, in many cases with little to no modifications. Since Tweets are

limited to 280 characters (not including links), eye-catching brevity is paramount.

Learn more about creating and managing an account at the [Twitter Help Center](#).

## Key Terms

### Impressions

The number of times a tweet appears in the timeline of a user.

### Reply

Analogous to the comment function on Facebook. Twitter users can reply to a post by typing in the reply section beneath it.

### Retweet

Reposting content published by another account. Since ideal posting frequency is higher on Twitter than Facebook, it's acceptable to retweet more often. However, it's still best if the majority of your posts are original.

### Timeline

The Twitter equivalent to Facebook's News Feed. When you publish a tweet, it appears in the timelines of some of your followers. Like Facebook, Twitter uses an algorithm that determines which tweets appear in a user's timeline.

## Creating an Effective Tweet

The guidelines for effective Facebook posts also apply to Twitter (see "Creating an Effective Post" above). To create a tweet with the same content (link, photo, video, etc.) as a Facebook post, you can simply copy and paste the text of the post, insert the same link, or upload the same photo. (When copying and pasting, make sure to use the @ symbol to mention any accounts mentioned in the Facebook post.) Use the same hashtags—they work the same way on Twitter as they do on Facebook.

Sometimes, Twitter's character limit may force you to modify the text of longer Facebook posts. You can condense text by sharpening your language and using abbreviations or symbols.

### Don't Auto-Link Twitter to Facebook

Avoid using the feature that automatically links your Facebook page to your Twitter account. Though this

may be convenient, it is utterly ineffective because your tweets will consist only of hyperlinks to Facebook, with no other texts or images. These tweets won't catch anyone's attention and will make it obvious that your organization is not investing time into its Twitter account.

## When to Tweet?

Aim for 1-3 tweets per day—the nature of Twitter as a place for up-to-the-minute news means that frequent posting is the norm. [Studies](#) show that tweets between 9 a.m. and 7 p.m., especially on weekdays (when Twitter users tend to be more active), are generally the most effective. You can use the Analytics tool to optimize timing based on your audience. To schedule tweets ahead of time, use [TweetDeck](#); log in using your Twitter username and password.

## Instagram

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### Overview

[Instagram](#) is a platform where users can post photos and short videos; its user base skews younger than that of Facebook and Twitter.

Because of the highly visual nature of their work, land trusts are in a great position to use Instagram successfully. Photos of beautiful landscapes, wildlife, and people enjoying the outdoors can highlight the importance of conservation in a way that words cannot. If you already publish photos on Facebook or Twitter, it makes sense to share them on Instagram as well—posting on Instagram is a simple and quick way to expand your audience.

Learn more about creating and managing an account at the [Instagram Help Center](#).

Instagram is a mobile-based platform: you can create an account and view photos on a computer but can only post photos through the free Instagram app on a smartphone or tablet.

## Creating an Effective Post

### Choosing the Right Photo or Video

Like you would on Facebook and Twitter, share photos and videos that tell the story of your organization's

mission and work. Along with typical shots of preserved lands and events, some organizations post photos and videos that give a behind-the-scenes look into the organization (for example, from a training conference or staff holiday party). There are many possibilities, and photo or video choice depends on what kind of organizational brand you want to project.

In addition to landscapes and wildlife, try to show people enjoying the outdoors. This highlights the impact of conservation on people and helps viewers imagine themselves in the outdoors.

Videos on Instagram can be up to a minute in length.

### Captions

Use the caption area to add context to the post, describe what's happening, or ask your followers to take some kind of action. The caption area is where you should use hashtags and mention other accounts, if relevant to the post. You can also tag people or organizations by clicking on the photo or video and typing their name; this way, your photo will appear on their profile.

### Story

Photos or videos posted to an account's Story disappear after 24 hours. Publishing a photo or video as a Story post, rather than a normal post, can be useful for documenting an event in real-time with photos and videos that you don't want cluttering your profile in the future. However, for land trusts posting on Instagram a few times a week or less, this is not as much of a concern.

### When to Post?

There is no hard and fast rule for ideal posting frequency on Instagram—some popular and effective land trust accounts post multiple times per day, while others post once or twice a week. The biggest determining factor is the amount of quality photos and videos available.

For most organizations, posting 1-5 times per week is a manageable and effective strategy. When you post a photo or video on Instagram, it usually makes sense to publish it on your other social media sites, and vice-versa.

## Other Platforms

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Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram give land trusts the best chance to reach a broad, diverse audience. Depending on their needs and staff resources, certain organizations may also want to consider the following platforms.

### YouTube

<https://www.youtube.com/>

Users can upload and view videos at YouTube, the world's leading video-sharing site. It is a popular (though not the only) choice for land trusts that create videos.

### LinkedIn

<https://www.linkedin.com>

People use LinkedIn to network and find jobs, internships, and volunteer opportunities. Land trusts can create a Company page; staff, board members, and volunteers with LinkedIn accounts can then link to the land trust in the section where they list their professional and volunteer roles. Organizations can also post jobs, internships, and volunteer opportunities.

LinkedIn can make sense for land trusts with staff and board members who are active on LinkedIn, as well as organizations looking to recruit staff, volunteers, or interns.

## Additional Resources

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### Posting Schedule

For more information about the best days and times to post on each platform, see CoSchedule's "[Best Times to Post on Social Media](#)" and "[How Often to Post on Social Media](#)," which collect and analyze the available data from different studies.

### Content

For ideas about different types of content a nonprofit organization can post, see [npENGAGE's "50 Social Media Content Ideas."](#)

### Volunteer Recruitment

For tips on using social media to recruit volunteers, see [Constant Contact's "Engage, Inform, Recruit: How](#)

[Nonprofits Can Use Social Media to Recruit Volunteers.”](#)

## Fundraising

For tips on using social media to fundraise, see [Classy’s “How to Turn Social Media Followers into Donors”](#) and [“9 Tips to Maximize Your Fundraising with Social Media”](#) on [Medium](#). For information about crowdfunding, an online fundraising tool often used in conjunction with social media, see the guide [Crowdfunding for Land Trusts](#).

## Resources at ConservationTools.org

To find other resources regarding social media, see the right column of the online edition at

<http://conservationtools.org/guides/155>

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## Submit Comments

Help improve the next edition of this guide. Email your suggestions to the Pennsylvania Land Trust Association at [info@conserveland.org](mailto:info@conserveland.org). Thank you.

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