



Is Facebook a risk for your speech pathology practice?

Facebook has evolved greatly over time, and so has our use of it. Gone are the days of it simply being used to chat with friends and share holiday photos. Professional use of Facebook has grown to the point where many people expect businesses to have a Facebook presence. With ever evolving algorithms and functions and various accounts settings, it can be difficult to stay on top of best and safe practice. Most concerningly, these changes can bring misunderstanding about the many risks and issues all businesses, including speech pathology practices, need to consider before creating a professional Facebook account.

Reasons for a Facebook account

Creating a business Facebook account because many other businesses or practices have one isn't a good enough reason. As with all other decisions and plans made for your speech pathology business, creating a Facebook account needs to be well thought through with the pros and cons considered carefully. Risk management is especially important as issues can quickly escalate due to the nature of how the platform can easily share and distribute information.

Your speech pathology practice should have a process and policy for the following in relation to a business Facebook account and its usage:

- > What information will be shared?
- > How responses to comments will be managed?
- > Who is responsible for managing the account?
- > How client permission, if posting information about clients, will be obtained and recorded?
- > Who is responsible for ensuring the content is appropriate for advertising speech pathology services?

Ethics of posting information about clients

It's becoming more common to see speech pathology practices sharing information about clients on Facebook. Even when done with the permission of the client, or the client's parents, it's important to consider how ethical or professionally appropriate this is. When intending to post information about client progress on Facebook, first consider the following:

Did you know?

94% of Australia's social networking users have a Facebook account. These Facebook users have an average of 234 friends each[^].

- > Could the information be shared without identifying the client? Is there any real benefit in identifying the client?
- > How many people will be able to see the information being posted (consider how many people follow your page and then their ability to share this further)? And who are these people? Is it possible that friends of the client could see the posts?
- > If the client is a child, as they get older how may they feel about their health information being shared publicly?

Client permission isn't always enough when sharing confidential health information. The reasons for and implications of this sharing need to be considered.

Blurring of professional boundaries

Using Facebook, and any other form of social media, can contribute to professional boundaries starting to blur. Social media encourages an informal means of communication which may be different to how you'd communicate with clients when face to face. This can alter the dynamics of the professional relationships between clients and clinicians. Professional social media use can also lead to clients contacting clinicians on their personal social media accounts. When using social media for work purposes, it's important to maintain the professional separation and relationship with clients by not altering the way you interact and communicate with them.

Privacy

Privacy on Facebook is almost a contradiction. When using Facebook remember:

- > Posts and comments can never be completely deleted, especially if someone has taken a screen shot of them.
- > Privacy within groups can't be guaranteed. It's not uncommon to hear of people creating fake accounts to access private groups and share their information.

- > If there's something you don't want to be seen by a regulator, client, colleague or competitor, never post it on Facebook.

Appropriate use of social media for advertising

Speech Pathology Australia has published a Code of Ethics – Advertising Policy which describes appropriate advertising of speech pathology services. The policy applies to all social media advertising (Facebook included) as well as any other forms of advertising that the speech pathologist has control over. The required level of professional language used and information shared in all advertising is also required when using Facebook.

The Code of Ethics – Advertising Policy can be found on the Speech Pathology Australia website, speechpathologyaustralia.com.au

Seeking advice

When using Facebook in a professional setting, consider the appropriateness of the conversations held in that forum, even if it's a conversation with other speech pathologists in a private or "closed" community.

While peer support has many benefits, using forums such as Facebook groups to seek and provide specific clinical information can pose a significant risk to speech pathologists. The risks not only relate to confidentiality of sensitive client information, but also provision and use of advice that is suggested without access to adequate information on which to base decisions. In many situations/scenarios, very little information may have been supplied about the case being discussed. Even if a lot of detail is provided, which carries risk for maintenance of confidentiality, the advice you provide to a colleague could potentially be clinically inappropriate or incorrect. Following advice provided via social media groups that may not be appropriate for your client poses a risk for the treating speech pathologist.

Speech pathologists have an ethical obligation to provide quality and competent professional services which follow evidence-based practice principles. Although general advice provided through a discussion of general clinical scenarios on a social media platform may be appropriate, for a discussion regarding client specific information speech pathologists are advised to consider how they seek professional advice, such as working with a supervisor.

Protect your livelihood.

Despite your best efforts, things can still go wrong. From allegations of negligence to a cyber-attack, no speech pathology business is immune from the unexpected. That's when having an experienced insurer on your side really counts.

Guild Insurance specialises in providing insurance products for health professionals and

health practices just like yours. Our unique understanding of the speech pathology profession has been developed through our 13 year partnership with Speech Pathology Australia.

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