

Tab 1

Addressing Inflammatory Opinions, Online + In-Person

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When engaging with the public, everything needs to connect to your mission.

In today's climate, many sites deal with inflammatory comments online or in-person. These comments may be based on a fundamental misunderstanding or misinformation. Sometimes, people are just mean online for no reason at all.

The best way to handle these types of comments is **to prepare for them before they happen**. Ensuring that every post or public program makes a clear and concise connection to your mission is one way to mitigate inflammatory opinions. Doing so helps strengthen your brand and manage expectations with your community and audiences.

Below, we've shared guidance, advice, and examples for how to navigate inflammatory comments. But remember: it's best to lean into your team, internal policies, and resources that plan ahead for difficult situations to determine how you respond – or don't respond.

Suggested Resources to Support Staff Navigating Inflammatory Comments

Staff will be better equipped to respond to challenging comments if they have the resources to do so. Here are three key resources that can help support staff.

1. Create FAQ one-pagers for exhibits or projects that involve public interaction.

Support staff by providing clear details and a basic understanding of the program, project or exhibit; this resource **serves to answer questions and respond to the public in-person and online** using official, brand-centered language.

How to Do It: Spend 20 minutes brainstorming anticipated questions or comments, and then spend another 40 minutes crafting concise, thoughtful responses. Ask front-end staff for their assistance identifying frequently asked questions or common complaints.

2. Strengthen internal support for staff.

✓ **Staff Briefings:** Offer times for all staff to come together and ask any questions they might have, from logistics to subject matter, on the program, exhibition, or event.

👋 **Train staff to provide extreme customer service:** Empower staff to make decisions either independently or in collaboration with a colleague to reach the best outcome.

- Example #1: Empower front-of-house staff to issue refunds in case of an escalating situation instead of sending an irate person to a phone number or email address to lodge their complaint.
- Example #2: Add Media Training and Deescalation Training into ongoing professional development.
- Example #3: Just like with the one-page FAQ, brainstorm possible scenarios and walk staff through how to respond, such as isolating the irate person in a conference room or office to allow them to air their grievances to a staff member.

 **Leadership presence:** When possible, leadership should be involved in the handling of difficult comments, both in-person and online.

- In-person: For programs with anticipated negative responses, leadership should be present and remain near the entrance to support staff interacting with visitors.
- Online: Keep open lines of communication with leadership or other team members, especially when there are negative comments.

 **TIP:** Create a Teams chat conversation (or Slack, or a group text) dedicated to sharing comments with leadership. Solicit feedback and craft responses together.

3. Develop policies and codes of conduct for your audience *and* staff.

Policy for Audience Members: Write and publish a social media “rules of engagement” policy. This can serve as a rubric for banning or hiding comments by clearly (but broadly) stating what is allowed and what is not allowed in your community. Example Guidelines:

- [National WWI Museum and Memorial Social Policy](#)
- [Museum of Us Social Policy](#)
- [The People’s House Code of Conduct](#)

Policy for Staff and Volunteers: Staff and volunteers, *with very rare exceptions*, should not use their own personal social media pages to speak on behalf of the organization. Only the institution’s social media pages should be publicly positioning themselves as the authority about any organization-related subject or stance.

A Rubric for Responding Online

The ultimate question: how should you respond, if at all, to these inflammatory comments? Refer to your internal policies, such as a Code of Conduct, rubric, or social media policy, first when determining when to respond or not respond.

Your ability to delete or hide comments, block users, or respond may depend on your organization's policies or affiliations. A non-government organization will have more freedom to block users or delete comments. Here's a sample rubric for determining social media responses:

Comment Scenario #1	Comment Scenario #2	Action to Take
Clearly spam content. Examples include: fake tickets, scams, copy-pasted comments that have nothing to do with you. Also includes posting the same or similar comments on more than two posts in a row.	The account calls out a specific staff member or volunteer by name with negative intent. This is not tolerated and is immediate grounds for blocking.	Block Users
Swear words are present in a negative comment. Some of these are automatically hidden in the social media platform's content filter. In Meta Business Suite, you can toggle on an option to automatically hide comments with profanity or with certain words of your choosing.  TIP: You can always comment: <i>"Apologies, this comment violated our social media policy and has been deleted. Please refer to our terms here: [your URL]"</i>	Off-topic comments that have heightened emotions. Comments that have no relation to the original content yet are overly critical, partisan, or spammy. Talk through your own policies with your organization's leadership on a periodic basis.	Hide (or delete) comments
Most comments fall into the "no response" category, such as when commenters are voicing an opinion that doesn't require a response from your organization. Oftentimes existing audience members will chime in in your defense.		No response
A comment is negative, but there is a clear and diplomatic solution.		Respond
Try to leave this as a last resort. Consider shutting off comments only overnight when you can't monitor.		Shut off comments

What does a good social media response look like?

Step 1: Acknowledge them with a greeting, such as “Hello [their name or handle].”

Step 2: Answer the comment in ONE sentence. Use TWO sentences only if it is absolutely necessary. Some tips:

- Use “we” and “us” instead of “I” and “me.” You are speaking from the perspective and strength of an organization made of many voices.
- Providing exceptional customer service in the digital space is equally as important as providing it in-person. So much can be misconstrued online with tone and intent, both from you and from the audience member. This is the place for patience, kindness and earnest responses. Go viral for your cool content, not your vicious diss. Try these alternatives:

When you want to say...	Say this instead...
What you wrote is not factual.	Thanks for bringing this up!
How do I sum up 500 years of history you never bothered to learn?	This is a complex and fascinating topic.
I don’t understand your nonsensical question	What can we help you find?
This is a long and drawn-out gripe specific to only to the commenter.	Thanks for your feedback! Please send us a direct message so we can resolve your issue.

- Do not overexplain. You are the authority on your subject matter. State a fact. Post a resource for further information. Thank them for asking.

Step 3: Add a link (if appropriate/applicable) – usually to something on your website, or it could be an outside source.

Step 4: Invite them back: No better revenge than them having a good experience.

A reminder for you and your colleagues...

You worked really hard on the content, or even played a starring role in the video. Someone being mean online or in-person **is not a reflection of you as a person, the other members of the team involved, or the value of the organization.** While you should **monitor** everything, you do not need to **respond** to everything. Take breaks when there is a particularly difficult situation. Cross-train others to monitor (not reply) to allow for coverage.