

Nurses can use social networking, especially Twitter, to develop professionally, by sharing knowledge and ideas, debating issues and asking for information

# How nurses can use social media professionally

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- › Ensuring nurses comply with the code of conduct

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**Abstract** Chinn T (2012) How nurses can use social media professionally. *Nursing Times*; 108: 29, 12-13.

Nurses can use social networking sites for professional development. This article provides advice on using social media professionally and ensuring this use complies with the code of conduct.

Many people regularly use social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter. Ofcom (2011) reported that 48% of all adults use such sites, which accounts for a quarter of all time spent on the internet.

The majority use social networking sites personally, but what about professionally? Can nurses use social networking sites, and in particular Twitter, as part of their professional development?

### What is social networking?

Social networking can best be described as the use of online media that shares characteristics such as participation, openness, conversation, community and connectedness (Mayfield, 2008).

Essentially, it is a way for communities to communicate and share information. Common forms of social media include Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, Myspace, YouTube, blogs, podcasts and online forums. Of all these, Twitter is probably the most professionally useful to nurses.

### What is Twitter?

Twitter is a social networking site that is open to anyone and free to use; all that is needed to sign up is an email address.

Twitter allows users to send short messages – “tweets” – of up to 140 characters to their friends or “followers”. Tweets can contain links to blogs, websites, videos or pictures. Twitter is a way to broadcast and receive information, rather like sending a text message, except that the message is received by a much wider audience.

### Why should nurses use Twitter?

Twitter is invaluable in enabling nurses to engage with the wider nursing community.

In the past, nurses worked, ate, lived and socialised with other nurses and knowledge was passed on and shared. This changed slowly over the years. Because nurses no longer live and work as closely, the sharing of knowledge and support is squeezed into a busy working day and, for some nurses, this does not happen at all.

Although nurses often use internet search engines, the volume of information available is making this increasingly time consuming. Using Twitter can provide knowledge and support for nurses quickly. This site connects real people in any geographical area and allows them to ask for help and be signposted to it; the Twitter nursing community both asks for information and provides it.

Twitter already has a thriving nurse community, which is growing all the time. It gives nurses access to like-minded professionals to share knowledge and explore ideas. Here are some insights about what nurses gain from tweeting:

@nursemaiden: “Support from my peers on a personal and professional level”;

@nursiedeb: “I get new knowledge. I get to question my current practice and find ways to improve it and I get to chat”.

## 5 key points

**1** Nurses no longer live together or work as closely together as they used to

**2** Social media offers new ways for nurses to share knowledge and expertise

**3** Previous social networking experience is not necessary to use Twitter

**4** Twitter chats are an excellent way to use the site professionally

**5** Nurses should comply with the code of professional conduct when using social media



Teresa Chinn talks to other nurses on her #Nurchat Twitter page

## Getting started on Twitter

Although a basic understanding of using the internet is needed, social networking experience is not. With Twitter, users can “follow” anyone, anyone can share and most people can see each other. Box 1 outlines some simple steps to start tweeting.

Here are some tweeting tips:

- » When looking for people to follow, think about your areas of interest and organisations that offer support in your working life. Search and follow people who are talking about these topics;
- » Do not worry about who will follow you – if you have or share interesting information, you will be followed. Being part of a community adds value no matter how popular or how many followers you have;
- » Spend some time just watching – see what other nurses are tweeting about;
- » As with all communication, listening is important. Stanton (2009) said listening forms 45% of communication; the same can be applied to Twitter. Listen to what others are saying and support and respond to them;
- » Twitter is a social environment and has its own etiquette – being polite on Twitter is important, so remember to say hello and goodbye, thank people when they retweet or follow you, and avoid swearing;
- » Some people are not polite or respectful – they are referred to as “trolls” and can deliberately set out to cause trouble. One of the best ways to deal with trolls is to block and report them.

Box 2 contains some key terminology on using Twitter.

## Twitter chats

Twitter chats are an excellent way to use the site professionally. These are usually regular chats that take place at a specific time and use a hashtag (#) as a flag so all involved can see the conversation.

Good Twitter chats for nurses are #NurChat, which takes place fortnightly, and #NTTwitchat, which takes place every Wednesday at 1pm. Details on #NurChat can be found at [www.wenurchat.co.uk](http://www.wenurchat.co.uk).

Box 3 outlines four steps for joining in a Twitter chat.

## What are nurses talking about on Twitter?

The nursing subjects discussed on Twitter are as diverse as nursing itself. Informal discussions often spring up, or users such as @NursingTimes start them.

Some recent subjects that have provoked discussion include: “How do you

## BOX 1. STEPS TO START TWEETING

- Log on to [www.twitter.com](http://www.twitter.com) and follow the instructions to sign up
- Add some information about yourself
- Search for people you want to follow, by using the search box. Here are a few ideas to get started:
  - @NursingTimes
  - @studentNT
  - @WeNurChat
  - @NMCNews
  - @theRCN
  - @BBCHealth
- Tweet about anything you find interesting
- Reply to any tweets you find interesting and chat with other nurses
- You can “retweet” a tweet that someone else has written that you like or find useful
- Search for subjects to find others who are interested in the same topic. For example, by searching for Nursing Times you can view all the tweets that are by or mention it

## BOX 3. JOINING IN A TWITTER CHAT

- Be on Twitter
- Keep an eye out for when Twitter chats are on by following the chat and visiting their blog/website
- One of the best ways to join in a Twitter chat is to use TweetChat. Visit [www.tweetchat.com](http://www.tweetchat.com) and log on using your Twitter details. Enter the name of the Twitter chat into the field that says “enter hashtag to follow”
- Usually after Twitter chats, a transcript of the chat is available to view

define a safe staffing level?” More formal chats, such as #NurChat, also take place and popular subjects discussed include the Mid Staffordshire Inquiry.

## Complying with the code of conduct

The Nursing and Midwifery Council (2011) is seeing an increasing number of fitness to practise cases involving the use of social networking sites and other online activity.

Nurses need to apply caution to Twitter and they should read the NMC’s (2011) guidelines on the use of social networking sites. New Twitter users should also consult their own workplace policy.

The NMC takes a commonsense

## BOX 2. TWITTER TERMINOLOGY

- **@** Every Twitter user has an @ symbol in front of their username. When tweeting someone, do not forget to add the @ or they will not be alerted to your tweet
- **Hashtag or #** A # is a flag used to highlight a subject. For example, nurses may use #nurseuk to tweet about things relevant to UK nurses, or #mentalhealth to discuss mental health issues. You can search on Twitter by just entering # and the subject you want to find out about
- **Retweet or RT** This is when you resend someone else’s tweet to your followers because you want to share it
- **#FollowFriday or #FF** Every Friday on Twitter people send out their recommendations for people to follow, using a #FollowFriday or #FF
- **Direct message or DM** You can send a private message to anyone who you follow and follows you; very useful for sharing email addresses or other private information

approach to the use of social media, advising: “Remember that everything that you post online is public, even with the strictest privacy settings... Presume that everything that you post online will be permanent and will be shared.”

This is good advice – Twitter is a public forum and should be treated as such; if what you are saying would breach confidentiality or the NMC code of conduct in a room full of people, then it will also breach these online.

## Conclusion

Although nursing has changed considerably since the days of nurses living together in a community, this does not mean the nursing community has ceased to exist. Nurses are now finding new ways in which to communicate and share knowledge, expertise and support.

It is of paramount importance that nurses understand their local policies and NMC guidance when using any form of social media. **NT**

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