

# A.A.<sup>®</sup> Guidelines

Internet

from G.S.O., Box 459, Grand Central Station, New York, NY 10163

A.A. Guidelines are compiled from the shared experience of A.A. members in various service areas. They also reflect guidance given through the Twelve Traditions and the General Service Conference (U.S. and Canada). In keeping with our Tradition of autonomy, except in matters affecting other groups or A.A. as a whole, most decisions are made by the group conscience of the members involved. The purpose of these Guidelines is to assist in reaching an *informed* group conscience.

## A.A. TRADITIONS AND THE INTERNET

We observe all A.A.'s principles and Traditions on A.A. public media such as the Internet.

**Anonymity** — As anonymity is the “spiritual foundation of all our Traditions,” we observe anonymity on public websites at all times.

In 2013, the 63rd General Service Conference affirmed that “the Internet, social media, and all forms of public communications are implicit in the last phrase of the short form of Tradition Eleven, which reads: ‘...at the level of press, radio, and films.’”

As Bill W. wrote: “At this altitude [public], anonymity — 100 percent anonymity — was the only possible answer. Here, principles would have to come before personalities without exception.”

In simplest form, this means that A.A.s do not publicly identify themselves as A.A. members using their full names and/or full-face photos. For more information on anonymity online, see the section of this Guideline, “Guarding Anonymity Online.”

**Attraction not promotion** — As our co-founder, Bill W., wrote: “Public information takes many forms — the simple sign outside a meeting place that says ‘A.A. meeting tonight’; listing in local phone directories; distribution of A.A. literature; and radio and television shows using sophisticated media techniques. Whatever the form, it comes down to ‘one drunk carrying the message to another drunk,’ whether through personal contact or through the use of third parties and the media.”

**Self-support** — In keeping with our Seventh Tradition, A.A. pays its own expenses and this also applies in cyberspace. To avoid confusion and to guard against the perception of affiliation, endorsement or promotion, care should be taken in selection of the website host. Website committees have avoided any host site that requires the inclusion of mandatory advertising space or links to commercial sites.

Many “free” web hosting services require that the website include mandatory advertisements or links. Most A.A. website committees see this as actual or implied affiliation or endorsement of the products or services listed in those ads. They have found it prudent to create a website through a service that does not include mandatory advertisements or links.

**Nonaffiliation, nonendorsement** — Linking to other A.A. websites will often have the positive effect of significantly broadening the scope of a site. However, even when linking to another A.A. site, care must be exercised since each A.A. entity is autonomous, has its own group conscience, and may display information that another A.A. group con-

science might find objectionable. There is no way to know when this might occur.

Experience indicates that linking to non-A.A. sites is even more problematic. Not only are they much more likely to display non-A.A. and/or controversial material, but linking might imply endorsement, if not affiliation. In the final analysis, experience strongly suggests that, when considering linking to another site, proceed with caution.

G.S.O. has attempted to avoid some of these pitfalls on G.S.O.'s A.A. website, aa.org, by confining its links to known A.A. service entities and by incorporating a mandatory exit statement when someone wishes to activate the outside links on the site. (This statement also covers access to application software such as Adobe Reader, which is provided to assist visitors in reading Portable Document Format (PDF) files.)

## GUARDING ANONYMITY ONLINE

Modern communication in A.A. is flowing from one alcoholic to another in ways that are high-tech, relatively open-ended and evolving quickly. Protecting anonymity is a major concern for members, who are accessing the Internet in ever-growing numbers.

As Bill W. noted, “Anonymity has two attributes essential to our individual and collective survival; the spiritual and the practical. On the spiritual level, anonymity demands the greatest discipline of which we are capable; on the practical level anonymity has brought protection for the newcomer, respect and support of the world outside, and security from those of us who would use A.A. for sick and selfish purposes.”

When we use digital media, we are responsible for our own anonymity and for protecting that of others. When we post, text, or blog, we should consider whether we are publishing at the public level. When we break our anonymity in these forums, we may inadvertently break the anonymity of others.

For more information on anonymity online, see the pamphlet “Understanding Anonymity,” the service piece “Anonymity Online and Digital Media” and the October 2010 issue of AA Grapevine on Anonymity on the Internet.

## GENERAL SOCIAL NETWORKING WEBSITES

Facebook and other social networking websites are public in nature. Though users create accounts and utilize usernames and passwords, once on the site, it is a public medium where A.A. members and non-A.A.s mingle.

The platforms in and of themselves do not infringe on our principles

of anonymity or any other Traditions. It is the actions of the individual that may cause harm to themselves, to others, or to A.A. as a whole. For that we are, each of us, individually responsible to our fellowship, to ourselves and to our personal higher powers. Using these platforms to provide information about anonymity online may actually strengthen the principle of anonymity at the public level.

Individual members can take clear steps to safeguard their own anonymity. For example, an individual or group might create an entirely anonymous social media account without use of their full name or face and for sharing about recovery only. Others may choose to use their names but not photographs of themselves. Both the letter and the spirit of the Eleventh Tradition are clear guideposts for our fellowship in this respect.

When it comes to the Twelfth Tradition this has proven to be something that only the individual can answer because of its foundation in humility. The following questions have proven useful tools for evaluating if our actions may or may not be in conflict with the principle described in Tradition Twelve.

- Is my posting about the message or the messenger?
- Am I carrying the A.A. message in the hopes of helping someone else, or simply “shouting from the rooftops”?
- Am I taking my story and affiliating it with political causes?
- Am I being extra cautious about not identifying other members as A.A. members in photographs or statements?
- Am I avoiding the temptation to incite controversy with caustic argument or bully others who disagree with me?
- Am I providing helpful links to my local A.A. website, aa.org, or the aagravine.org?

As long as individuals do not identify themselves as A.A. members, there is no conflict of interest. However, someone identifying themselves as an A.A. member using their full name and/or a likeness, such as a full-face photograph, would be contrary to the spirit of the Eleventh Tradition, which states in the Long Form that, “...our [last] names and pictures as A.A. members ought not be broadcast, filmed or publicly printed.”

Experience suggests that it is in keeping with the Eleventh Tradition to not disclose A.A. membership on social networking sites as well as on any other website, blog, electronic bulletin board, etc., unless composed solely of A.A. members and password protected.

Websites and social networking offer individuals the chance to post a great deal of personal information about themselves (and others). Our experience suggests that some A.A. members do not post anything that is “A.A. jargon” on their personal profiles and in “status updates,” while others feel it is alright to do so as long as A.A. or Alcoholics Anonymous is not mentioned.

These websites often allow users to create social networking “groups” and the ability to invite others to “events” for like-minded individuals. Some A.A.s have chosen to create A.A.-related groups. Since this is an evolving medium, A.A. members are frequently “learning as they go,” as technology and applications change practically on a daily basis. Our experience has shown that the evolving nature of social networking platforms makes it difficult to provide specific guidelines for using these resources for A.A. purposes. Any A.A. group or member

that is thinking about entering this public arena should closely consider the privacy policies of such sites, in light of A.A.’s tradition of anonymity. For example, social networking sites may provide full names and pictures of group members, contrary to A.A.’s practice of avoiding such disclosures in public media. Even “closed” or “private” groups might still reveal an individual’s identity. Being well-informed *prior* to joining or starting such a group is the key to protecting your own anonymity, and that of others.

G.S.O. has received numerous complaints from concerned A.A. members regarding anonymity breaks online, inappropriate use of the A.A. name, and copyrighted materials and protected trademarks being improperly used on Facebook and other social networking websites. No online A.A. or non-A.A. entity should purport itself to be a spokesperson for A.A. or act as if they represent the General Service Office, A.A.W.S., or the General Service Board. Each A.A. entity is autonomous and encouraged to make decisions by informed group conscience decision in light of the guidance provided in our Twelve Traditions.

A.A. members sometimes contact G.S.O. for suggestions on how to remain within the Traditions on Facebook and other social networking websites. Keep in mind that G.S.O. staff members are not specifically trained in technology, but can act as a resource regarding A.A.’s Twelve Traditions and the shared experience of the Fellowship in the U.S. and Canada. How A.A.’s spiritual principles play out in the digital environment needs to be carefully discussed by each A.A. individual or entity creating an online presence.

## **A.A. WEBSITES — SETTING UP A LOCAL WEBSITE**

Decisions in the Fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous are made through an informed group conscience and the decision to create a website is no different. Whether area or district, central office or intergroup, A.A. experience suggests forming a committee to discuss all aspects of the project, including all possible concerns about the Traditions. Unless password-protected and for members only, an A.A. website is a public medium, and, therefore, requires the same safeguards that we use at the level of press, radio, and film.

Early on, it is important to agree upon a method for achieving the group conscience that represents the local A.A. community, and for informing local groups, districts and central/intergroup offices in an area (if affected) about the committee’s progress. When the committee has reached a consensus about its role and responsibilities and the scope of the website, its findings are shared with the whole body (district, area, etc.) and a decision is made through an informed group conscience vote on whether to move ahead with the development of a website. As part of this process, committees may wish to bring technical questions to experts in the field. A guiding resource of shared A.A. experience regarding websites is the G.S.O. service piece “Frequently Asked Questions About A.A. Websites.”

## **SPIRITUAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Based on A.A.’s strength and history of personal and intimate sharing, the spiritual nature of “one drunk talking to another” is an ongoing concern when discussing technology as a source of A.A. information. Even many Internet-savvy A.A. members say that they do not want the ease of new technology to detract from the one-on-one sharing that

has been so essential to our Fellowship and our recovery from alcoholism. It is helpful to remember that there is no need to let the speed of technology dictate the speed of our actions.

Based on shared experience to date, website committees not only discuss the technical aspects of developing a website but also address questions related to preserving the spiritual connection created by one alcoholic talking with another. Some committees have reported a loss of “personal touch” when relying too heavily on technology, while others report that they have found a balance that works for them. It will be up to a committee’s informed group conscience to determine what A.A. content is useful and appropriate. The good news is that today’s decisions can be reviewed, revised, abandoned or expanded. A committee can always try something for a certain length of time and then come back and determine how well it is working. This is the A.A. way!

## **WEBSITE ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES**

After an informed group conscience structure is in place to decide the contents, policies and procedures involved in setting up and maintaining an A.A. website, it has been suggested that a webmaster (web manager) be appointed or elected. The webmaster is responsible to the committee or the groups served.

One area has the following experience: Their website committee is composed of six A.A.s: the web chairperson, area Public Information (P.I.) chairperson, a current district committee member (D.C.M.), a past delegate, a current general service representative (G.S.R.) and an ad hoc member. The latter three individuals are selected by the website chairperson, and their term of service is two years. In addition, a webmaster, alternate webmaster and other ad hoc members are responsible for the day-to-day maintenance of the website. (Experience indicates this can be time-consuming if the webmaster is responsible for updating local meeting information.)

Some committees choose to create their own website guidelines, including: description of the site’s purpose; details of the website’s content; procedures for adding or removing content; committee rotation schedule; defining the difference between a website committee and a website maintenance team (e.g. webmaster and alternate); guidelines for the website committee and, if applicable, guidelines for the web team outlining its composition and responsibilities.

## **SELECTING A DOMAIN NAME**

The choice of a domain name should, as other critical elements, be determined by an informed group conscience. To preserve Alcoholics Anonymous’ trademarks and service marks, website committees are asked to avoid using the marks “A.A.,” “Alcoholics Anonymous,” and/or “The Big Book” in their domain names.

It has been our experience that many service entities have integrated lower case “aa” into their domain names along with other identifying information (e.g., [www.aacentraloffice.org](http://www.aacentraloffice.org) or [www.area999aa.org](http://www.area999aa.org)). This has proved to be a positive resolution in support of A.A.’s trademarks and service marks.

## **USE OF COPYRIGHTED MATERIALS**

Copyright restrictions protect material displayed on a website just as copyrights protect A.A.’s printed literature. Permission must be obtained from G.S.O. prior to including A.A.W.S. or A.A. Grapevine and

La Viña material. A link to the [aa.org](http://aa.org) Terms of Use can be found at the bottom of every page on [www.aa.org](http://www.aa.org).

Just as with A.A. newsletters, websites created by A.A. areas, districts and central/intergroup offices can quote a phrase, sentence or brief paragraph excerpted from A.A. literature — such as the Big Book (*Alcoholics Anonymous*), *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, *The A.A. Service Manual*, and Conference-approved pamphlets — without a prior, written request. When this occurs, the proper credit line should be included to ensure that A.A. literature copyrights are protected. After a brief quotation from a book or pamphlet, the following credit line should appear:

Reprinted from (*name of publication, page number*), with permission of A.A. World Services, Inc.

As the A.A. Preamble is copyrighted by A.A. Grapevine, the following words should appear beneath the Preamble or any article reprinted from the Grapevine:

From the (*date*) Grapevine. Reprinted with permission of A.A. Grapevine, Inc.

We ask that you do not recreate items that are currently available on the G.S.O. or A.A. Grapevine websites. Instead, link to the appropriate pages of the sites: [www.aa.org](http://www.aa.org) and [www.aagrapevine.org](http://www.aagrapevine.org).

## **POSTING SERVICE MINUTES AND REPORTS**

Deciding what contents to post on public websites requires careful consideration. While it can be helpful when websites make minutes of meetings, reports and background material readily available to a broad population, it is also paramount to keep in mind that these documents may be posted in a public medium. Each document needs to be reviewed and edited to insure that the full names of A.A. members are not included.

Some committees have one version of minutes for A.A. members only, which includes full names and personal phone numbers and email addresses, and a second version of the report that omits names and personal contact information so that minutes can be placed on the committee’s public website.

In addition to local A.A. members, please remember that the following individuals are A.A. members and that their full names and photographs should not appear in publicly posted reports or on publicly posted flyers: Class B (alcoholic) General Service Board Trustees, A.A.W.S. and Grapevine Directors, G.S.O. staff members and some Grapevine and La Viña employees. If there is any doubt about placing a person’s full name in a report, it would be best to ask permission first.

Some committees may find it perfectly acceptable to post full names and personal contact information on a password-protected website meant for A.A. members only. This will be up to the informed group conscience to decide.

## **PERSONAL PHONE NUMBERS ON A.A. EVENT FLYERS**

Until relatively recently, A.A. members usually had little concern about placing their first names, last initials and personal phone numbers on flyers announcing upcoming A.A. events, since these flyers were typically given out only in A.A. meetings, left on tables at other A.A. events or distributed to members. Today, event flyers can be easily uploaded and viewed on websites, accessible to the general public.

Due to search services on the Internet, it is now possible to utilize phone numbers to find out a person's identity, including full names and, possibly, other personal information. If A.A. members become increasingly uneasy with personal phone numbers being placed on flyers, event committees may need to look into alternate ways of providing contact information such as an event email address.

### **“PRIVATE” SECTIONS OF A.A. WEBSITES**

G.S.O. has heard of some districts and areas that have designated certain parts of their websites as “private,” which require the use of usernames and passwords to gain entrance. In some instances, the only requirement to receive a username and password is to state to the webmaster or another trusted servant that you are an A.A. member. In other cases, access is only available to those holding specific service positions.

Website committees that are considering creating password-protected sections of their websites may wish to consider: what content is private and what is public; who will be given access to the private information, and how; and how usernames and passwords will be communicated, stored and/or maintained.

Some websites use these private sections to change or update meeting information or trusted servant contact information. When giving the ability to a service worker to change content on a website or database, committees may wish to proceed with care. Members with the ability to change content may need training on the software used, and the committee may want to designate someone to review the data for accuracy.

To date, G.S.O. has not heard of any major problems regarding non-A.A.s retrieving confidential A.A. information from these private sections. However, website committees may wish to discuss how they will safeguard confidential A.A. information, and how to avoid a breach in security.

A.A.'s shared experience thus far is that some A.A. members feel comfortable using their full names and giving personal contact information on a password-protected A.A. website. However, other members are less comfortable providing this information for communication purposes, even for a password-protected site. Committees usually exercise care in helping members learn about new modes of communication, and continue to offer members the option of receiving A.A. correspondence by mail if preferred.

G.S.O. has some experience with private, password-protected A.A. sites. First, the A.A.W.S. Directors and then the General Service Board of Trustees agreed to receive their background information via a “dashboard” — a username/password protected electronic communication tool. In 2008, the General Service Conference members also received their background information on a private dashboard for the first time. (All Conference members were also given the choice of receiving their background on CD and/or on paper.)

### **ANONYMITY AND EMAIL**

Electronic mail is a widely used and accepted method of communication. It is now used regularly as a service tool in A.A., but as with any service, we need to ensure the Fellowship's Traditions are maintained while still receiving the most benefit from this form of communication.

When using email it is necessary to consider the anonymity of the recipients of messages. Sending messages to multiple recipients that disclose the email addresses of everyone on the addressee list is a potential break of someone else's anonymity. Therefore, it is a good idea to obtain a recipient's explicit permission before using his or her email address for A.A. correspondence, especially if it is a workplace email address. When sending A.A. mail to multiple recipients who wish to remain anonymous, use can be made of the BCC (Blind Courtesy Copy) option available on most computers.

### **EMAIL IN A.A. — ACCESS, ADDRESSES AND ROTATION**

It is not necessary to own a personal computer or laptop to utilize email. Many A.A. members in service who do not have computers use free email services to obtain an email account and specifically designate it as their A.A. email service. A.A. members can check their email accounts at public libraries, Internet cafes, and anywhere else Internet service is available.

For A.A. service positions, generic email addresses can be passed from one trusted servant to another at rotation time. For example, the sample email address and account for pichaird10a7@area999.com could, upon rotation, be passed on, maintaining the email address identity for the position, one rotation to the next.

### **USING FULL NAMES IN EMAILS TO PROFESSIONALS**

It is suggested that email communication with professionals is similar to a letter-mailing project with two caveats: 1) emails can easily be forwarded, and 2) the contents of emails can easily be cut-and-pasted, changed and/or uploaded to websites.

Professional “friends of A.A.” have shared that, for the purposes of Cooperation with the Professional Community (C.P.C.) or Public Information (P.I.) service, it lends credibility to the letter or email if a full name is used and if the letter or email has a professional look and feel.

The Public Information coordinator at G.S.O. responds to email and letter requests from the media with the following signature:

Sincerely,  
John Doe (name not for publication or broadcast)  
Coordinator of Public Information

### **ANONYMITY ON PERSONAL COMPUTERS**

Some A.A.s think, “I have my own computer, so I have nothing to fear about the anonymity of A.A.s in my address book.” However, it is possible that a motivated individual could obtain a username and password to access another person's email account. Hopefully, such an intrusion would not occur, but it may be prudent to select a password that is as unique as possible and to keep the password private.

Even the most guarded email account could be “hacked” by a computer expert, but at this point we find that many A.A. members and committees are willing to take this risk, all the while utilizing prudence and good common sense.

We may also want to consider that email address books used for A.A. correspondence on a home computer, laptop, smartphone, tablet, digital media device, etc., may be available to friends and family if more than one person uses the device.



## **THE DANGERS OF SPAM**

It is up to a committee's informed group conscience to determine how best to approach service projects via the Internet, especially regarding C.P.C. or P.I. projects.

It is strongly suggested that A.A. members not send bulk unsolicited email messages for A.A. service, i.e., email "mail shots." By doing so they could be bringing the A.A. name into public controversy and damaging the reputation of A.A. as a whole. It may also be illegal, so get informed on the local and federal laws pertaining to email communication and spam.

Instead, the committee could discuss the possibility of sending A.A. correspondence to a small number of recipients or sending personalized emails one at a time. Emails may be filtered into a recipient's spam account so an alternative follow-up plan should also be in place in case there is no initial response. In addition to A.A. members continuing to make personal contacts, an effective route for interacting with professionals and the public has been to provide the link to G.S.O.'s A.A. website, aa.org.

## **SPEAKER TALKS ONLINE**

Members report that audio files of A.A. talks increasingly are being disseminated over the Internet. If a member objects to having his or her A.A. story broadcast publicly, he or she may wish to contact the site's webmaster and request its removal.

Numerous members have acted, with good outcomes, on the following suggestion for speakers at A.A. events that appears in the G.S.O. service piece A.A. Guidelines for Conferences, Conventions and Roundups:

Experience shows that it is best to encourage speakers not to use full names and not to identify third parties by full names in their talks. The strength of our Anonymity Traditions is reinforced by speakers who do not use their last names and by taping companies whose labels and catalogs do not identify speakers by last names, titles, service jobs or descriptions.

In addition, some A.A. members, if being recorded for future play on a public website, may choose to leave out other details of their lives that may make themselves or their families identifiable.

In recent years, the trustees' Public Information Committee has requested that G.S.O. contact speaker taping companies and remind them of A.A.'s Tradition of Anonymity at the public level and ask for their cooperation.

## **ONLINE A.A. MEETINGS/GROUPS**

Just like regular A.A. meetings, online A.A. meetings/groups are autonomous. Due to the lack of a central geographic location, online

A.A. meetings/groups are not a direct part of the U.S./Canada service structure. A.A. members are encouraged to participate in service where they physically reside and to participate in group conscience decisions locally. In addition, some online A.A. meetings/groups have business meetings and collect Seventh Tradition contributions.

## **INTERNET STREAMING AND WEB CONFERENCING**

Among A.A. members, there are various levels of experience in the use of computers, email and the Internet. It is important to remember that not all A.A. members have computers and not all who have access are comfortable using this technology. Some people are just now signing up for their first email accounts, while some are talking about things like "Internet streaming," "Teleconferencing technology," and "Web conferencing."

Since these topics are relatively new, G.S.O. is still collecting shared experience. One district has shared that they are considering how to utilize Internet streaming and/or teleconference/web technology so that general service representatives (G.S.R.s) may participate in area assemblies without traveling to the assembly site. They are considering several options: video and audio conference; audio-only conference; full-stream one-way video and audio with text chat return.

Geographically isolated A.A. members are able to participate in weekly A.A. meetings thanks to the efforts of local A.A. committees to connect them via video conference. A.A. Conventions have also utilized the Internet to live stream portions of their programs to far distant members.

Many technological options are possible and, presumably, more are being developed each day. Yet, as stated earlier, it is important not to let the speed of technological development pressure a committee into a quick solution as opposed to a well thought out A.A.-oriented decision. Of course, all decisions must include careful consideration of any situations where an A.A. member's anonymity could be compromised at the public level.

## **LOCAL SHARED EXPERIENCE REQUESTED**

Local A.A. needs and experience will determine how A.A. communications will develop in this evolving electronic age. If you have questions, or if you would like to share your website committee's experience, please contact G.S.O. at:

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