



University of Pennsylvania
ScholarlyCommons

GSE Publications

Graduate School of Education

10-6-2011

Status Update: Actively Engaging Our Friends

Alan Ruby

University of Pennsylvania, alanruby@gse.upenn.edu

Shannon Kelly

University of Pennsylvania

Follow this and additional works at: https://repository.upenn.edu/gse_pubs

 Part of the [Higher Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation (OVERRIDE)

Ruby, A., & Kelly, S. "Status Update: Actively Engaging Our Friends," *Times Higher Education, World Reputation Rankings* 2011.

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. https://repository.upenn.edu/gse_pubs/527

For more information, please contact repository@pobox.upenn.edu.

Status Update: Actively Engaging Our Friends

Abstract

Social media do not wait for the communications office to open - but do offer informed universities unique brand-building opportunities, explain Alan Ruby and Shannon Kelly.

Keywords

higher education, social media

Disciplines

Education | Higher Education

Social media do not wait for the communications office to open - but do offer informed universities unique brand-building opportunities, explain Alan Ruby and Shannon Kelly

Ranking schemes that use expert assessments pervade our culture. They influence the films we watch, the music we buy and the books we read. They shape the sale of cars, wine and restaurant meals, as consumers use the judgements of others to sort competing services. These judgements are sometimes based on samples, test drives, blind tastings and selections from the menu. And sometimes they are influenced by past experience - by last year's model or a great vintage, by history and reputation.

For universities, *Times Higher Education* asks the connoisseurs of higher education - researchers published in leading journals - for advice about the "best in show", regardless of location, price and mission. Faced with constraints of time, distance and office, they may rely in varying degrees on reputation and brand recognition to select universities they have not been to recently (or at all) to supplement their direct experience.

As the higher education market has become larger, more diverse and more competitive, reputations and brands have become more influential. They attract consumers and investors - students and funders both public and private. They act as proxies for detailed information about products and services. They foster and reinforce group identity, a sense of belonging that bolsters reputation.

The increased importance of brands has been paralleled by rapid growth in the channels of information that shape reputation and transmit brands. Social media outlets have proliferated, diversifying the ways information is spread. There are live chats, blogs, interactive bookmarking and video sharing. All can and do shape reputations.

Universities have been slow to react to the shift in the media environment. They have one foot in the print and post era, and one in the online age. Yet they often engage social media on the same terms as they engage mass media: fixed and formal messages, static images and long production cycles.

But social media are different from conventional media because control of content lies with millions of widely dispersed users, each with a voice. Institutions cannot dominate the conversations about their identity as they do in expensive traditional media forms.

Compared with older forms of communication, social media deliver messages farther, faster, more frequently and for free. There are few barriers to entry and no escalating distribution costs as the message reaches more people. And those people are not passive recipients, either: they re-tell and reinterpret the message and send it on.

While there are lots of competing voices, most of them, research shows, report positive experiences. These third-party endorsements are opportunities for a university to leverage its brand. They can be amplified by strategic placement and targeted recirculation through affinity groups and list serves.

To achieve this brand leverage, universities have to engage with social media platforms and listen to many active voices. And they have to be quick about it because messages on these platforms move fast and reach many.

For example, a single student's "status update" on Facebook at midnight about University X will reach on average 130 friends. If 15 of those friends comment, their messages will go to more than 1,000 individuals. Some will post a related message on Twitter. A complete stranger who searches for University X on Twitter will see this post; they could write a blog and reach another group of readers. Before University X's communications office has opened, a message about the institution has been created and spread.

The values and mores of social media are egalitarian, interactive, inclusive, critical, engaged and continuous. Anyone, regardless of geography, race, wealth or language can comment, share a video or join Facebook, which claims "It's free and always will be". Social media are always "on", always

open and extend institutional identity to places and people in all parts of the world.

This means a university that cares about its reputation in the market must be "on" and open. It must be present and active on social media platforms. It needs to listen and interact with its communities. It must extend its identity and leverage its brand by engaging with its "friends".

Alan Ruby lecturers in higher education and Shannon Kelly leads social media strategy in career services at the [University of Pennsylvania](#)