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Social Media's Integration into Communication Centers: A UNC-Greensboro Case Study

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The UNC-Greensboro Speaking Center (SC) acknowledges the growing impact of social media as a means of sharing information, connecting with stakeholders, and fostering a community of practice. In this study, we review the history of social media integration into our center. After securing a presence primarily on multiple platforms, we shifted our focus away from using social media solely for information dissemination to promote social connections and relationships. In our latest digital project during the summer of 2019, we launched a new social media campaign with the goal of promoting our center to incoming freshmen. Through acknowledging our progress, our center plans to continue increasing our social media presence as we believe these platforms remain prospective interpersonal resources.
Keywords: Social Media, Communication Center, Speaking Center, Community of Practice, Alumni, Generation Z.
Follow UNC Greensboro's Speaking Center on Youtube (UNCG Speaking Center); Twitter and Facebook (@UNCGSpeaking); and Instagram (@uncgspeaking)

Introduction

As social media use continues to increase, universities and campus organizations have begun focusing their efforts on connecting to Generation Z through this evolving medium. By providing active, innovative forms of engagement, social media has the potential to encourage interaction with communication centers through a mode of communication that digital natives are already using to significant degrees. Communication Centers need to look into these platforms as a means of connecting with current students, alumni, prospective applicants, parents of students and alumni, faculty and staff alike. As we believe there is a growing opportunity for connecting with university stakeholders, we examine how our Speaking Center (SC) has incorporated social media in the past and discuss our current strategic plan for further developing our social media presence (see Figure 1).
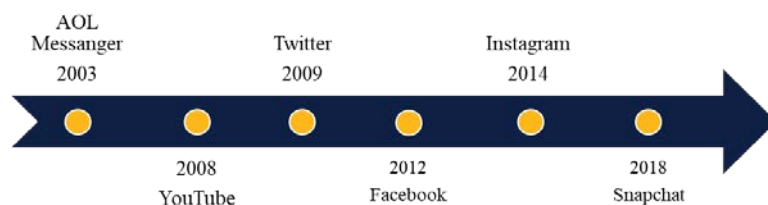

Figure 1.

Evolution of The Speaking Center's Social Media Presence

AOL Messenger (2003). We envisioned using AOL to answer quick questions about speaking assignments and provide feedback to students. We prepared to engage, connect, and push URLs to our online tip sheets. Through AOL, we mostly received questions about location, hours,

and making appointments. We switched to a paid Libraryh31p subscription, which included an online Ask Us box linked to our website homepage (see Figure 2). The chat box continues to be operational during our regular hours. Schwartzman's (2013, 2017) analysis of our chat history asserted that live chat is the future of communication centers. While we have not yet fully committed to all of Schwartzman's suggestions, we have seen increases in students asking for help via chat (see Figure 2).
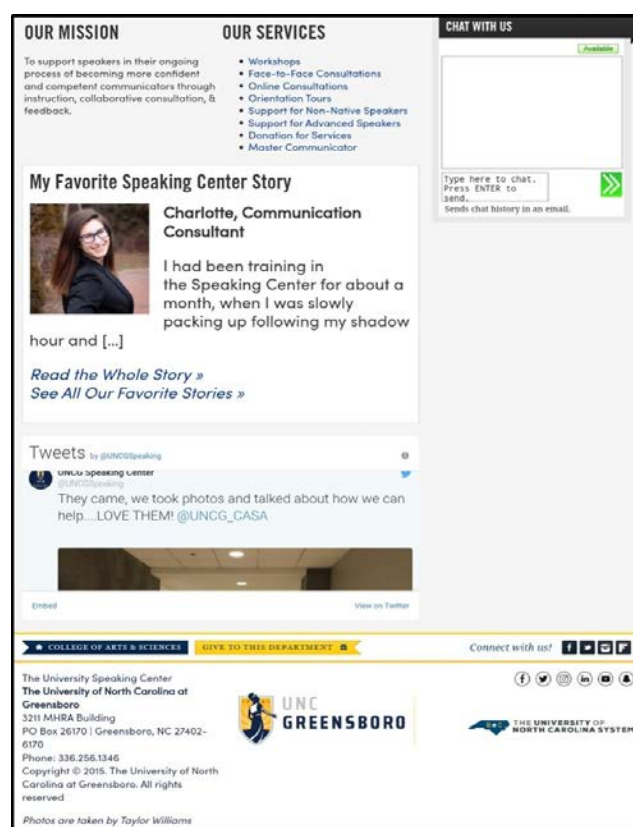

Figure 2.

Youtube (2008). In the beginning, our Youtube page was primarily a source of "talking head" or "skit" videos to illustrate the work that we do in the Center. More recently, we have been using @UNCGSpeaking on Youtube to adapt our tipsheets into short whiteboard videos, create class-specific videos for assignments, and develop collaborative content with our University Library partners. While we have not pushed these videos as actively as we would like, we do link to them on our resource page on our website.

Twitter (2009). Starting in 2009, we pinned our @UNCGSpeaking Twitter feed to the bottom of our web page, recognizing that Twitter was already being utilized in higher education as Linvill, McGee, & Hicks (2012) found "...colleges and universities primarily employed Twitter as an institutional news feed to a general population," and that, "Twitter promotes an open exchange of information and real-time connections that can be employed in a dialogic manner" (p. 636-638). We envisioned using Twitter to provide quick updates such as announcing our hours of availability, welcoming new freshmen, sharing published articles and SC news, and connecting with assignments for UNCG's basic communication course. We soon discovered that faculty were viewing our feed as we observed workshop requests aligning with our Tweets about available dates. We also use this platform for social justice statements. For example, we posted messages in solidarity with those affected by the Christchurch Mosque shooting which left nearly 50 Muslims massacred in New Zealand and in support of #NeverAgain movement and walk-out protests started by students from Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School after a mass shooting left seventeen students and staff dead (see Figure 3 and Figure 4).

Figure 3.

Figure 4.

Facebook (2012). On our Facebook page @UNCGSpeaking, we found evidence of Vizzier's (2005) Community of Practice (CoP). In writing about the SC, Vizzier (2006) found that our student-employees formed a CoP because they shared concerns and a passion for helping and that they learned how to do it better as they interacted regularly. We have seen an evolving CoP within a closed Facebook alumni group where we witness a community that still identifies as being a part of the SC. For instance, in August 2019, one of the original SC consultants from the first group of consultants in 2003 posted a message that was liked by members of different SC alumni cohorts and received comments from the most recent graduating class (See Figure 5).

Figure 5.

The closed SC Facebook group spans a 17-year period of alumni who worked across many different cohorts of the SC's student-staff. Most of the members do not know each other outside of this closed group. To help bridge the cohorts, we share and tag alumni posts with, "who worked with (fill-in-the-name)?" Alumni post job openings, articles of interest, and throwback photos to the group. Current SC students doing research often leverage this closed group membership for data collection. For example, Zakia-O'Donnel (2013) used the closed group to gather alumni stories for his ten year SC history.

We have increased our page engagements on the center's official, public Facebook by featuring and tagging our current student-employees. The decision to feature and tag current employees was influenced by other Facebook engagement successes, which included selling our SC t-shirts through a third party vendor each November and connecting to UNCG's alumni giving event each spring. Current and past SC students as well as their parents purchase shirts or make donations directly to the SC. After receiving a parent donation of

$200.00, we increased featuring student-employees and encouraged them to have their parents follow the SC on Facebook.

Recently, when one alum sustained life threatening injuries abroad, we used Twitter and Facebook to help the family garner donations via their GoFundMe campaign. We also used the closed Facebook group to share the news and to request videos of encouragement and love. Donations made in the names of our alumni, even those who did not know her, and videos posted proved that this is a strong community. As ours is an organization which values people and relationships above everything else (Cuny, 2018), staying connected with our alumni is by far our greatest social media success.

Instagram (2014). We have been using @uncgspeaking on Instagram primarily to post photos of special events in the Center such as pictures from our staff appreciation weeks, themed-dress days, as well as to feature our Communicator of the Week (COW) and graduating staff members (See Figure 6 and Figure 7). Now that Instagram and Facebook are integrated, we are able to cross-post easily.

Figure 6.

Figure 7.

The Future of Social Media in our Center

Social Media Challenges. One challenge we faced in incorporating social media into our center is the generational and demographic difference in how, and on what platform, our target audiences' traffic. For example, some faculty, alum, and parents primarily use Facebook while newer alumni, current students, and some faculty are more likely to use Instagram, Twitter, and Snapchat. The demographic differences can make it difficult to reach all of them with a single campaign. Another challenge is with continuity and posting regularity. Our director has been the main, and sometimes only, person to post updates. As we look to increase our SM presence and to use it more intentionally, we will also need to consider how to address these challenges.

Setting a Social Media Goal. We understand the potential impact social media has in further connecting the SC with our stakeholders, so in the summer of 2019, we began a strategic plan to reach the target publics that we want to create and/or strengthen relationships with. Our initial target was to engage with the incoming freshman class. According to Durfy (2019), "Unlike Millennials, [Generation Z] have never known a world without social media – 44% check their social media profiles on an hourly basis"(p. 1). As Generation Z begins early adulthood and enters higher education, using social media to promote our university and the services the SC offers appears highly necessary. The goal in engaging with students is to give them preemptive exposure to the SC so that they are already familiar with us when they come for consultations (as many are required to do in their foundational communication and speaking intensive courses). If they have heard of, or been engaged with, the SC

before they ever step foot in our lobby, they might be less likely to feel trepidation at the unknown experience of visiting a campus resource. This strategy of making a connection early is understood by UNCG at large as they have incoming students complete a scavenger hunt of various campus resources during the convocation day activities called NAV1GATE (see *Figure* 8). We use this same connecting strategy through social media even before new students arrive on Campus.

Figure 8.

Implementing a Strategic Social Media Plan. To initiate our social media campaign, we arranged a meeting with the Social Media Coordinator for University Communications, to gather recommendations and to align with UNCG's social media outreach. Having a contact in University Communications on our campus

is a strong affordance for us, as we are able to tap into the network of connections and learn best practices that the university has invested in growing. We asked that the SC undergraduate staff attend the meeting as they are well positioned to implement new initiatives. They are digital natives, highly adept at using social media, and are closest to the life experiences of incoming students. During our meeting, we were advised the following:

- Be more cognizant of the type and quality of images we apply to our profiles.
- Schedule content posting on each platform.
- Allow time to plan and edit posted content.
- Rely on different social media platforms to appeal to specific audiences.

As a result of our conversation, we began to implement several of the strategies into our campaign:

- We updated the avatars and cover images across our platforms to use our university's approved logos and branding.
- We added social media links to the signature of all outgoing SC emails.
- We looked for other University departments and groups to follow and to invite to follow us on these platforms.

Interacting with Incoming Freshman. After our platforms were updated, we began working on our goal of interacting with incoming freshman. We used hashtags to both locate freshman and to boost our post exposure. For example, we used #uncgsoar, #uncgyfy, and #uncg2023, which were also being used by other UNCG accounts, to specifically target incoming freshman. The undergraduate consultants, between consultations and daily tasks, spent downtime discussing the best approaches to engage with freshman as well as logging on

to Instagram and Twitter to like and comment on first year students' post, noting the SC's excitement to work with them in the future.

Conclusion

As we move forward, we plan to move away from primarily using social media to disseminate information and towards active engagement on each platform. We will continue to utilize our Facebook accounts, but will be more strategic in targeting families by featuring student staff and livestreaming events. On Twitter, we will continue to target faculty and staff as well as increase engagement with current students by more fully utilizing hashtags, tagging other accounts, and retweeting relevant posts. We will also use that strategy on Instagram but focus more on students by emphasizing sharing higher quality images, highly relevant articles, and engaging videos. We will also build on our established practices. For example, we plan to utilize another university affordance, our Teaching and Learning Common's new one button recording, podcasting, and lightboard studios to raise the quality of our YouTube content which we can then push more on other social media platforms and on our website.

As social media continues to become ever more integrated in society, communication centers can use these systems to form connections with digital natives as well as non-natives who are utilizing social media as part of this cultural shift. Engagement with faculty and staff, parents, alumni, and current and future students provides us with connections that were once difficult, if not impossible, to obtain and/or maintain. As Boyd (2016) notes, when logging onto a social media account, "You see your 'friends,' the people with whom you've chosen to connect...

These people shape your experience of social media and the world that you've constructed there" (p. 49). If communication centers, like ours, can find ways to become those "friends," we can use social media platforms to connect with students, post news and events, and create opportunities to expand our reputations far outside of their traditional range. In the future, we at the UNC-Greensboro Speaking Center hope to continue utilizing social media as a resource for innovation and growing our CoP. We hope that this case study will provide guidance for other communication centers and organizations looking to leverage social media platforms.

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