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SOCIAL MEDIA USE FOR PUBLIC RELATIONS AND REPUTATION MANAGEMENT IN THE UNIVERSITY SETTING

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Abstract. This is an examination of social media use for public relations and reputation management at a mid-sized Canadian university. There has been much study about the use of social media for pedagogical purposes, but less for university public relations purposes. Key observations for best practices included having an established guiding philosophy about social media use, encouraging two-way symmetrical communication between students and administrators, adding social media formats in stages versus immediate immersion across all formats, and the importance of maintaining a social media calendar. Challenges in social media include privacy issues, gaining interdepartmental support, and the potential for misuse of information.
Keywords: social media; reputation; university; public relations.

Introduction

The use of social media by students is often studied, but how can social media be best utilized by universities for public relations purposes to promote their own brand, build community, and enhance audience engagement? Very little research has been done about the use of social media by higher education for public relations purposes (Constantinides E & Stagno M 2011; Davis C H F III et al 2012). This is a case study of how one university in Canada is using social media to engage audiences, build community, and to enhance brand reputation.

Social Media Use and Universities

Since the advent of Facebook in 2005, and the subsequent development of other social media platforms, organizational leaders and communicators have considered how best to use social media

to achieve organizational objectives. In higher education, around the world, a prevalent use of social media has been for teaching and learning (Dabbagh N & Kitsantas A 2012; Wodzicki K, Schwämmlein E & Moskaliuk J 2012; Laru J, Näykki P & Järvelä S 2012). About 80% of faculty in the United States has integrated some form of social media into their course work, including the use of Facebook, blogging, podcasting and video sharing (Moran M et al 2011). Social media has also been examined as a tool to facilitate students' transition into college life (DeAndrea D et al 2012) or for community building to enhance learning (Top E 2012).

Universities use social media to maintain their own daily business activities with their many departments and faculties, conducting administrative activities, and achieving organizational objectives. These activities are largely conducted by various administrative departments, academic units, and faculty members acting independently without any central university controls (Davis C H F III et al 2012). One hundred per cent of colleges and universities surveyed in the United States in 2011 were using some form of social media in their daily business affairs, mainly Facebook, Twitter and/or a blog, and mainly for the purposes of recruiting and for admissions (Barnes N & Lescault A 2011; Cappex.com 2010). A more recent study showed that Facebook was the most widely used and most successful form of social media used in higher education (Davis C H F III et al 2012), followed closely by Twitter and YouTube (Rios-Aguilar C et al 2011). Higher education has also used social media for crisis communication (Dabner N 2012).

Social Media Use among College Students

Half of all social media users are between the ages of 25 and 44 (Pingdom 2012); some 84% have Facebook accounts, and 25% use Twitter (Noel-Levitz 2012). The vast majority of students, both in the United States, and in some other countries have a profile on Facebook (Davis C H F III et al 2012; Hussain I 2012).

With widespread social media has come a growing awareness of the potential harms and risks including unwanted exposure, privacy and surveillance issues, unanticipated use of personal data, personal disputes and disagreements, accidental leaks of information, and potential denigration, slander, and libel issues (Grimmelmann J 2009); there has also been a growing concern for the inordinate amount of time students can spend on social networking sites (Davis C H F III et al 2012).

In spite of the widespread use of social media, "little is known about the benefits of its use in postsecondary contexts and for specific purposes (e.g., marketing, recruitment, learning and/or student engagement" and ongoing study is needed (Davis C H F III et al 2012: 2).

This is a case study of the use of social media by a Canadian university to build community and enhance student relationships. Data was gathered through a personal interview with the developer of the social media program and observation. This study is examined through the lens of North American public relations scholarship and thought, with a focus on practice one Canadian context, and is rooted in democratic traditions. This case study has its theoretical grounding in brand communities from the business literature; and two-way symmetry, organization-public relationships, and communitarianism from the public relations literature.

Literature Review

The relationship between an organization and its public can be considered a "brand community". A brand community is conceptualized as "a specialized, nongeographically bound community based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand. It is specialized because at its center is a branded good or service…. Brand communities are participants in the brand's larger social construction and play a vital role in the brand's ultimate legacy" (Muniz A & O'Guinn C 2001).

Public relations scholarship has consistently been centered on a concern to sustain mutually satisfying professional relationships between an organization and its publics (Cutlip S et al 1999; Grunig J & Hunt T 1984). Two-way symmetry is a popular paradigm that attempts to define and

describe an aspect of ideal public relations practice that deals with the nature of communication between an organization and its public. Ideal practice has been considered as communication flow in two directions between an organization and its public, and where communication is balanced with respect to mutual adjustment by both parties (Grunig J & Hunt T 1984). This has been suggested as a preferred and ethical model of practice because it attempts to manage conflicts and seeks harmony; however, it is recognized by scholars and practitioners that it is normative, is often overly idealistic, and may not be suitable for all situations, particularly if the two parties have two competing and opposite missions (e.g., an oil company versus an environmental group, or a pro-choice versus a pro-life group). But, two-way symmetry nevertheless remains a strong and dominant paradigm among public relations scholars and a sought-after ideal whenever possible for the purpose of producing mutually satisfying and beneficial relationships with one's publics and to maintain organizational legitimacy and social harmony.

From this value of producing mutually beneficial organization-public relationships (OPRs), emerged a stream of scholarship that sought to identify variables indicative of the successful OPR (Ferguson M 1984; Bruning S & Ledingham J 1999). During this time, Kruckeberg & Starke (1988) argued that the public relations process could be used for community-building. They posited that, through a process of communication, individuals can overcome isolation and develop networks and relationships based on shared interests and, through connection and communication, they can work toward problem resolution. Kruckeberg and Starke thus argued that not only can public relations help organizations achieve organizational objectives; it has an active societal function toward improved relationships and community-building.

One of the core reasons that organizations engage in the pursuit of mutually beneficial relationships is to maintain organizational legitimacy by protecting and enhancing brand reputation (Fombrun C 1996). Many CEOs view reputation management primarily as the function of the executive with assistance from public relations. Public relations advisers are there to "ensure that the leadership of the organization communicates effectively with all of the stakeholders, both by coaching management into a better communications performance and by helping to articulate messages that matter" (Murray K & White J 2005).

This is a case study of one Canadian university's efforts at utilizing social media for two-way symmetrical communications to maximize brand reputation and build a brand community to enhance organizational reputation.

Case Study

Background. Founded in 1910, Mount Royal University is a public university located in Calgary, Alberta in Western Canada. *Universities* in Canada are those institutions of higher education that grant degrees (bachelor's, master's, and/or doctoral). There are also *colleges*, which grant two-year diplomas. Universities and colleges can be either public (administered by the provincial government) or privately owned and operated. MRU is one of about 100 universities in Canada and 6 in the province of Alberta. There are also a myriad of technical and vocational institutes across the country. About 1.8 million of Canada's population of 35 million people attend university. Mount Royal University has about 15,000 full-time students and about 10,000 non-credit students. With about 14 faculties and about 450 full-time faculty members, it is one of Western Canada's premiere undergraduate universities. MRU regularly ranks high in surveys of Canadian universities, particularly in the categories of student satisfaction and active learning (Conner W 2012). MRU's mission and vision is centered on quality teaching and an enhanced student experience, so it is a high priority for MRU to seize any opportunity to improve student engagement and student satisfaction as one of its most important publics; hence, the use of social media has become an attractive option to explore.

Social Media Development at Mount Royal University. It is not uncommon for organizational leaders to embark cautiously with regard to social media and to feel somewhat skeptical. Some leaders are usually more positive and enthusiastic about it than others. Such was the case at MRU

when marketing and communications coordinator Karen Richards began to explore the possibilities. With the support of a few administrators, she has been able to explore the world of social media for higher education at MRU since 2007, and has successfully built a brand community of some 25,000 across a half dozen social media channels. She credits her success to a strategic effort at engaging and building a vibrant brand community across time with slow and careful planning and a commitment to two-way symmetrical communications. All quotes from her were gathered by interview on April 15, 2014 (Richards April 15, 2014, interview by S. Braun).

Her success led her to a full-time position as Word-of-Mouth Marketing Strategist at MRU, a position she largely carved out. Her title has been carefully crafted. "Word-of-mouth marketing is not about promoting. It's about meaningful, long-term engagement with possible prospective students to alumni," says Richards.

The work of the Word-of-Mouth Marketing Strategist is varied. Richards makes regular posts and blogs across the various channels. She monitors social media conversations and engages in problem-solving. If a student has posted a negative comment, for example, Richards will intervene to see if there is anything she can do to problem-solve or create better satisfaction. She may correct a misperception or answer a question. Richards also assists professors with their online presence. She recommends that professors use blogs. Online faculty engagement can enhance the professor-student relationship and benefit faculty members professionally (Northam J 2012). She also engages in social media measurement and analysis utilizing Hoot suite.

The purpose of social media at MRU has been to spread positive word about the institution and to build a sense of community among students and stakeholders. It is Richards's job to make sure that MRU's positive characteristics are disseminated, tweeted about, re-tweeted, that conversation about MRU on social media platforms is accurate, that students feel a sense of belonging and ownership over the channels, and that external stakeholders get a sense of the quality of the relationships between the university and its students. Mount Royal University currently has a presence on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and YouTube.

The evolution of MRU's social media thrust evolved also somewhat out of practicality. With the advent of social media platforms, many internal departments began to want their own Facebook page or blog post and administrators were left with the question of whether or not they felt comfortable throwing the social media sphere open to any or all on campus who wished to utilized the MRU name and brand. While administrators could not halt use, they decided to harness the force and request departments to come under centralized guidance in order to protect the brand and provide cohesive messaging. This request was largely supported.

"Once we sat down with people and explained the commitment, time, and energy needed to maintain a social media account and that we could provide support and guidance centrally, people saw the benefit," says Richards, and thus, she was able to secure a good deal of cooperation.

According to Richards, the foundation of a good social media plan is to first become clear about one's social media philosophy. "For us," says Richards, "we consciously decided that we would not use social media to sell things, but, rather to enhance relationship-building with our publics."

Next, she made a commitment to enter the world of social media thoughtfully and carefully and not risk any huge error. She started by studying each social media channel to note its own unique abilities and capabilities and create a strategy for social media use and timing. "The number one problem that people can fall into is to jump on social media just for the sake of jumping and to not carefully weigh out the effects of each channel. Certain channels are good for certain things."

MRU began with Facebook. Richards says Facebook has been effective for building community. Students will "Like" the Facebook page and MRU will make regular posts about the goings on around the university and to notify of events. The audience for Facebook has largely been students. Facebook was also used by various internal departments who were looking to promote themselves. There are currently 8,000 members on MRU's Facebook pages. The tool has also attracted potential students. Many high school students will "Like" the page and follow the news as they contemplate their choice of college or university.

Richards surveyed the environment carefully before moving forward to another channel. "I watched the channels closely and then, once I was comfortable with their purpose and capability, I would slowly add another channel." From Facebook, Richards gravitated toward Twitter.

Twitter has produced a reach of stakeholders that goes beyond those interested in Facebook, and largely attracts an external audience. "Twitter has attracted individuals and organizations interested in what MRU are doing because it meets their own informational and organizational needs," says Richards. She cites such followers as political parties, environmental groups, educational groups and those interested in reaching the college-aged audience. "We have other universities following us, media follow us for news, politicians follow us to see what public opinion is; we have people interested in knowing what the university is doing and what students are doing whether related to youth, Aboriginal issues, careers, or sustainability and environmental groups. Any groups interested in what we're doing really, even arts and music." Richards says MRU puts out a wide variety of information about student life, academic research, events and speakers on Twitter. "Twitter provides a view of the breadth of activity at MRU and I make sure that my tweets demonstrate that." Richards notes that with 8,000 followers, if each has a reach of 200, the re-tweets have a potential to go to hundreds of thousands.

While she was developing MRU's social media strategy and channels, she developed and fine-tuned a set of social media guidelines. This is where MRU has been cutting edge in the Canadian market. Until 2011, says Richards, no other Canadian university, and many in the Pacific Northwest of the United States with whom she had professional association, had social media guidelines. MRU was able to provide leadership and direction in this regard. She gathered a group of 10 MRU representative including faculty members, alumni, and information technology personnel, to research and develop the document. At the time, they could not find any resources related to social media guidelines for higher education, so they reached into the corporate world for inspiration. Seizing some ideas, they whittled away at them until they were able to settle on guidelines they felt suited the higher education context. "We wanted to do it first in our area and do it well," Richards says.

After two months of dialogue with faculty, staff and students that consisted of discussion, consultation, surveys, and focus groups, Richards discovered a general caution toward social media use and a welcoming of guidelines. Privacy issues were of a major concern and staff wanted to see consequences for infractions. It should be noted that the guidelines were created to inform marketing and communications only, and not for faculty use in the classroom, out of consideration for academic freedom. Social media guidelines can cover such topics as philosophy, values, civility, privacy, respect for the audience, obeying terms of service, authenticity, copyright, obeying terms of service, and legal issues, among others (Petroff M 2010).

After establishing Facebook and Twitter accounts, Richards embraced LinkedIn. This channel has been a good source for the organization to post a professional presence and for faculty to post their professional backgrounds. The audience for LinkedIn is professional organizations and also individuals interested in knowing more about faculty members. LinkedIn serves as a good source for business, career, and donor contacts.

In response to a high demand by internal departments for video representations, Richards established a university YouTube channel. All of MRU's videos are in a central location and are consistent with the MRU brand and key messaging. Video provides an immediate visual experience and allows communication across platforms. "I can tweet a link to the students for a video about the recreation centre, for example. Students like hearing and seeing; whereas, a brochure takes a long time to get to them and they may never see a brochure. But, because students have mobile devices, the video can reach them directly. Video and mobile work well together," says Richards.

In 2012, after a year of observation and planning, Richards integrated Instagram. She noted that students were using it and she noted that it fit the MRU brand; whereas, for instance, Richards passed on Pintrest because it functions largely as an ecommerce function, and the MRU philosophy about social media was that they were going to use it for relationship-building and not for commerce. "Instagram provides an opportunity for students to share what they are doing in the moment by taking

and posting casual photos. For MRU, I capture moments around MRU and post," says Richards. She will often 'Like' other students' posts and she notes the excitement that students feel when the university acknowledges their communication. "This meets one of the values in our social media guidelines for responsiveness," notes Richards. "The one thing we try to avoid in the university-student relationship is the feeling or comment that 'nobody ever gets back to me'. This is the death knell in social media relationships," she notes. MRU's Instagram account has 500 users and is growing daily.

In the process of posting and tweeting, Richards encourages the use of a social media calendar where she plots the key events on campus from major speakers to fun events to final exams to graduation. The student life cycle is recorded and plotted. She uses this information to create timely and relevant postings.

Richards's future plans include integrating Google Plus. "I'm keeping my eye on it and I have a placeholder on it. It's not extremely active but I believe it is important for MRU to have a presence on it and that it's important to secure the name on larger platforms. Additionally, we are transitioning over to Gmail, so I'm thinking ahead," notes Richards.

Richards notes a core purpose to the entire social media exercise. "We want to be responsive and identify and fix problems toward mutual satisfaction [in the manner of two-way symmetrical public relations]. She provides the following example:

An example that I think is great is with an initiative called Student Spaces. In 2008 there were numerous complaints from students on the MRU Facebook page (which coincided with anecdotal complaints recorded for years) that there were not enough spaces on campus to quietly read or study. I brought the complaints on Facebook to the attention of the VP of Student Affairs and Campus Life, and he struck up a committee made up of student association representatives, myself, and a library representative. We engaged in some research to identify specific problems. We approached some of the students who had complained on Facebook. They provided feedback on what they were unhappy about, what they wanted, what their current habits were, etc., with regards to studying on campus. This research led to organizational action and adjustments. There were a few main outcomes came out of this year-long process (all of which was updated and communicated on the MRU Facebook page so students knew we were looking into it and taking action).

For one, the Student Spaces committee discovered that students do not typically go out of the building in which their program is located and so were not aware of numerous spaces on campus they could go to. We did an exhaustive audit and compiled the information into a website so students could see that if they were willing to leave their own building, there were options on campus. We categorized the spaces as "multi-purpose", "individual", and "quiet", so they could best choose what suited their needs. We also re-categorized a few more spaces as "quiet" based on feedback from students. We embarked upon a two-year communications and marketing campaign to let students know about the spaces and the website.

Administrators also secured a budget that allowed us to upgrade many spaces with new furniture, plug-ins for laptops and better lighting. Also, the library realized the extent of students' unhappiness about the library not being a quiet enough space to study, and implemented their own "group" and "quiet" areas within the library.

Tips for Success. Richards offers the following key tips for success:

– Before embarking on using social media as an organization, develop a philosophy about social media use. A philosophy will help guide decision-making.

– Consider an overall strategy about why you want to use social media and which channels will best suit your organizational goals. Avoid the temptation to simply jump in and use channels indiscriminately.

– Develop social media guidelines. Many organizations jump into social media use without the careful consideration of guidelines for use. In the construction of guidelines, be aware of institutional policies, student codes of conduct, and academic expectations.

– Proceed slowly and thoughtfully. Consider which channels to adopt based on organizational goals and objectives and consider what it will take to maintain each channel. Each channel an or-

ganization adds represents a commitment of time, energy, and resources. Richards recommends 5-7 hours of time each week per channel. She recommends 3-4 posts per week on Facebook, 5-10 tweets on Twitter per day, and one monthly or bi-monthly blog as guidelines for best practice. "Unless one is prepared to dedicate people to maintaining the site, it is wasted effort and one risks producing the veritable social media graveyard of old sites with outdated information, which hurts the brand," she notes.

– The development of a social media calendar is a key to ongoing success. One should be sure to create a calendar with all social media channels and plan the scheduled tweets and posts. "It's often easy to start on a channel, but more difficult to maintain – one often encounters writer's block. This can be remedied with a social media calendar," said Richards. With a calendar, one can examine university events and plan entries and plan posts that are relevant and meaningful to the audience.

– Be responsive. Social media is, after all, by definition, *social* and *relational*. Use the function to engage in two-way symmetrical relations and consider where the organization can make adjustments toward enhanced relationships.

Pitfalls. Richards confesses that this is a job she has largely carved out of her own interest and with the key strategic backing of a few supportive leaders. It can be a challenge to get the support of every administrator, but insists that all it takes is a few key supporters in administration.

It is not always a smooth process; there has been some disagreement along the way. Some internal departments may wish to engage in social media without any guidance. The key here, says Richards, it to sit down and speak with them. "You can set a vision, pose relevant questions, provide guidelines and let them know about the commitment it will take to do this," she says. "Often, they are not aware of the time and energy required to properly maintain one social media channel."

Additionally, Richards cites the temptation to become enamored with tactics without considering an overall strategy. "One can get caught up in the toys and all the bright and shiny things available to use. One can get overly excited and choose the wrong platform. A blog might be better than a tweet or email, or a website might work better. One can't just go to the tactic first; one must think through the strategy."

As the brand community grows, so does the potential for problems. Grimmelmann (1999) noted the myriads of issues that can erupt in the social media world, including the possibility for potential abuse by universities searching public sites for such information as preferences, activities, and geographical region. Issues of privacy and ethics by all participating parties surround social media use.

With some 25,000 members across all these at MRU channels, issues related to conduct and speech, privacy, and spam have developed. Students may become frustrated and make threatening or non-flattering comments about the university or faculty. Students may post photos or make comments that have the potential to violate privacy law. Students may become distressed and make comments that reveal mental instability (even involving the threat of suicide) and the ability for anyone to join conversations or to track information has created more spamming. All of this has led to the creation of more policies.

Outside studies show that many faculty report that the downside to using social media is simply the time it takes to monitor for negative content, maintain the site, and keep it current (Cappex.com 2010). If communications are more centralized, these tasks can go to designated personnel and be kept off of faculty and staff. Studies also show that many faculty members will not adopt come social media channels simply because they don't feel confident or well-trained in the technology (Moran M et al 2011). Professional development opportunities and resources need to be given to support the use of social media among faculty either for teaching and learning, or to promote their own work and thus, promote the university.

On a positive note, Richards feels comforted in knowing that a large majority of the MRU community is connected via social media especially in the event of a crisis. MRU also has a Social Media Crisis Communication Plan. Studies show that only some 20% of companies worldwide have a social media crisis plan (George A 2012: 33). In the event of an emergency, the majority of the community can be communicated with.

Conclusion

As the use of social media and the array of social media sites continue to grow, organizations will continually be faced with the questions of whether to use them, which ones to use, and how to best utilize them to support organizational goals and objectives. Organizations my continue to stumble into the fray, simply diving in and becoming enamored with the tools and tactics, without strategic planning such as evaluating against organizational purposes, considering strengths and weaknesses of each platform, and understanding the necessary commitment of time and resources to create a successful experience. This can lead to incorrect utilization, or under utilization, disillusionment, and premature abandonment.

For organizations to achieve success in the use of social media, they need to consider their philosophy about the use of social media. Also, ongoing dialogue and consultations with faculty and other stakeholders help to pave the way to adoption; this may need to be supported with training and professional development to secure participation and sustain interest. From this, goals and objectives can be developed to support that philosophy. A carefully-constructed set of guidelines that does not negate existing organizational policies and law needs to be developed to guide practice and for consistent messaging. Human resources and budget needs to be allocated to guide and monitor social media efforts for organizational cohesion and consistency. Time needs to be dedicated to responding to target public concerns and to correct any misinformation. Also, channels need to be carefully and properly selected – not all channels are created equal and each serves differing purposes. A careful analysis of organizational goals and a wise matching to an appropriate social media channel are necessary for success.

As social media becomes more utilized, problems, which are common to human communication, may emerge. Issues of proper conduct, appropriate speech, and potential for spam will likely emerge. Organizations need to consider these eventualities and prepare for them as early in the process as possible in order to successfully manage them. Grimmelmann (2009) suggests some policy interventions such as public disclosure torts to protect private information, rights of publicity, reliable opt-out options, greater predictability and consumer protection regarding glitches and changes on sites, prohibition on activities that provide rewards for recruiting and membership, and education about privacy risks.

As with any communication effort, there are positives and potential to achieve objectives, in spite of the difficulties. Social media has the potential to reach audiences in ways that print cannot. It is immediate, it engages a broad array of the senses, and it is a very direct way to communicate with one's audiences. Its ability to produce two-way symmetrical communication makes it an example of its potential for public relations excellence.

Universities will continue to wrestle with if, and how best, to use social media, particularly since one of its major publics, students, are among the biggest consumers of it. It seems inevitable that institutions of higher learning must engage with the use of social media to promote their brands and to communicate with target audiences. Additionally, social media's potential as an effective method of communication for crisis communication management, leaves universities little choice but to engage.

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