A Social Media Strategy for an Academic Department

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This essay describes the process one communication studies department used to develop a social media strategy. That process involved identifying the audiences to be reached, establishing goals and objectives, conducting an audit to identify possible message posts, and selecting posts to reach our goals and objectives. The resulting strategy involves posting messages two to three times per week targeted toward specific audiences and reflecting twelve objectives. A calendar was created to guide the posts. Future research will assess the effectiveness of the strategy.

As post-secondary enrollment continues to decline across the country, universities are paying more attention to recruitment and retention of students. Although admissions and communications offices have traditionally been responsible for these efforts, department chairs and faculty are also asked to contribute to them. Having been encouraged by our administration to develop a department Facebook page, we set out to determine not only how to create such a page but what our overall social media strategy should be. This essay describes our journey to develop a social media strategy beginning with a Facebook page. In the paragraphs below we describe the audiences we wanted to reach, the goals and objectives we created, the audit we performed to identify a universe of possible message posts, and the resulting social media strategy.

Research by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2021) shows that between 2018 and 2021 public two and four-year higher education institutions across the country have experienced a reduction in enrollment in each of those years. In Minnesota, the declines have been among the highest. After years of continuing decline, the Minnesota state system lost 20,000 students between 2019 and 2021 (Faircloth, 2021). Furthermore, projections of high school graduates in Minnesota suggest that there will be a slight increase in the number of students graduating from high school between 2021 and 2025 but that number is expected to decrease significantly between 2025 through 2032. (Office of Higher Education Minnesota, 2021). Thus, there will be fewer eligible students to recruit. These declines put stress on institutional budgets and in turn, administrations are under pressure to recruit and retain more students.

One might generally consider recruitment to be a function of admissions and communications offices but with the added pressures of enrollment declines, other players are expected to do the work as well. As one vice president for academic affairs said "it takes a campus to recruit" (Higher Education Marketing, 2016, para. 2). An assistant professor of

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biology noted that although there is an element of recruitment and retention in all student/faculty interaction, there is now an increased interest in it. "Now, more than ever, administrations are leaning on faculty to assist in those efforts" (Drawdy, 2017, para. 2). One university president said it will take cross-departmental cooperation to be successful in recruitment (Higher Education Marketing, 2016). As part of that cooperation, department chairs are sometimes specifically asked to help recruit and retain students. Articles such as *10 Student Recruitment Tips for Department Chairs* (Kelly, 2014) and *Strategies for Recruiting Students to the Humanities* (Muir & Oliver, 2021) demonstrate this cross-departmental approach.

Research is just beginning to examine the use of social media by universities. One study examined how top-ranked universities used social media and found four categories of strategies: strengthening the institution's image, providing educational services, explaining research and expected activity, and informing about events (Figueira, 2018). Another study examined student engagement with university Facebook sites. They found three student engagement patterns: posting, commenting and engaging in discussions. They also identified five factors that influence engagement with the site. They are: (a) the administrator's contribution, (b) the members' contributions, (c) group usage, (d) information seeking, and (e) members interest and engagement (Assimakopoulos, et al. 2017). While these studies help us understand how social media sites operate and provide some broad general insight into strategies that could be used, they do not provide guidance on specific questions such as types of posts and concrete objectives that could be sought. In addition, they were all conducted on university-wide sites. How would a department level site be different from a university-wide site? How would an academic department shape its presence on social media? Who would our audience be? Where would we reach them? What would we post? What would we hope would be the result?

To answer these questions and to support our administration's efforts to bring new students to the university, we decided to develop a social media strategy for a Facebook page for our communication studies department. We started with Facebook because we had a Facebook page already set up, although use of it was rare; as other social media sites emerge as having staying power and appeal to our audiences, those could be considered as well.

To develop our strategy we did a number of things. First, we identified the audiences with whom we wanted to enhance our relationship. Second, we developed objectives that we wanted to reach for each audience. Third, we identified types of posts we could make to our Facebook page to help achieve our goals and objectives. Fourth, we created a calendar that lays out a consistent, meaningful plan for when posts are to be made to reach all of our goals and objectives.

Audience

Social media outlets can reach many audiences. According to Statista.com (2021), Facebook was the first social network to surpass one billion registered accounts and currently sits at more than 2.74 billion monthly active users. The company currently also owns four of the biggest social media platforms in the world, all with over one billion monthly active users each: Facebook, WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, and Instagram. In the fourth quarter of 2020, Facebook reported over 3.3 billion monthly core family product users. Those numbers represent staggering audience potential. Thus, Facebook is a good place to start our strategy.

To be most effective we identified the most important target audiences we wanted to reach via the platform and then shaped our strategy around them. Our goal was to enhance our relationship with potential new students, currently enrolled students, and former students.

Our potential student audience includes high school students considering a higher education, adults considering returning to the university for further education or to complete an unfinished degree, and students currently enrolled at the university who have not yet chosen a major or minor or who might want to change programs or who need to fulfill general education requirements. Our currently enrolled student audience includes students who have already declared Communication Studies as either their major or minor and/or are pursuing a certificate. Former students are alumni of the university who have graduated with a major, minor, or certificate in Communication Studies.

Goals and Objectives

Our goals are to enhance our relationship with each of our target audiences. To reach those goals we created these specific objectives.

Potential Student Objectives

1. Recruit new students by arousing interest in our programs.

2. Recruit new students by highlighting the value of CMST offerings to other currently enrolled students.

3. Recruit new students to CMST general education courses.

Current Student Objectives

1. Inform students about timely, relevant class and program information.

2. Remain engaged with students currently enrolled in CMST classes.

3. Increase sense of belonging to our department and university in our students.

4. Help students find jobs and internships.

5. Teach students about non-western perspectives on communication.

6. Create a culture in the department that welcomes international and marginalized students.

Former Student Objectives

1. Remain engaged with CMST alumni.

2. Increase sense of pride in our alumni.

3. Encourage donations from alumni.

Posts

Our next step was to identify the universe of possible messages that could be posted to Facebook for an academic department. This was accomplished with an audit of the Facebook pages of departments and programs at our university and others following suggestions by Tuten and Solomon (2018) in *Social Media Marketing*.

We found twenty-one active Facebook pages representing one college, four schools, twelve academic departments, three programs (academic areas within a department), and one student club. The audit involved reviewing each of these twenty-one Facebook pages and recording the types of messages posted. Once the review was completed, the resulting types of messages were grouped into sixteen categories. The categories are presented in Table 1 below with representative messages.

Once we identified the types of messages that could be posted to a Facebook page for an academic department, we needed to link the messages to specific goals and objectives. We reviewed the types of messages and designated which types of messages would help achieve our objectives for the identified audiences. Table 2 displays message posts by objective and audience.

Lastly, we created a calendar that would guide our posting frequency and schedule. We found from our audit that two or three posts per week seemed to be effective in keeping audiences engaged with an academic page. Thus, our calendar identifies two messages to be posted each week during a given semester. A third message can be posted as the need arises. Here is a sample of two months from the calendar to demonstrate what it is like.

April

Week 1   Post 1: "What does CMST look like in other countries?"

                Post 2: Repost from other university account (career center, food pantry, etc.)

Week 2   Post 1: Announcement about commencement activities

                Post 2: Throwback Thursday (vintage photo from archives)

Week 3   Post 1: Alumni Spotlight

                Post 2: Job/internship announcement (if available)

Week 4   Post 1: Types of jobs CMST majors can get

                Post 2: Throwback Thursday

May

Week 1   Post 1: "What does CMST look like in other countries?

                Post 2: Highlight of successful student project from semester

Week 2   Post 1: Repost from other university account

               Post 2: Congratulatory messages and photos for commencement

Week 3   Post 1: Alumni spotlight

               Post 2: Throwback Thursday

Week 4   Post 1: Job announcement

               Post 4: Report on successful internship completion

Thus, our social media strategy is to post 2 to 3 messages per week to enhance our relationships with potential new students, currently enrolled students, and alumni and to achieve specific objectives for each of those audiences. Ideally, our posts would reflect all twelve objectives and they would follow our proposed calendar. We recognize, though, that there will not always be content available for each objective on the date specified on the calendar. Further, posting requires staff time, which is limited. Thus, we have decided that for the initial implementation of our plan we will post when content is available and do our best to meet as many of the goals and objectives as we can.

We have created a team that is responsible for the posting. It consists of an office administrator, a student worker, several faculty, and a student intern when available. Each member posts when they have relevant content with the student worker and office administrator sharing most of the responsibility for implementation. Our plan is to continue with the strategy and after a period of one year, complete an analysis of its effectiveness. Tabulating people reached, engagement, number of comments, and other metrics available through Facebook analytics will be used to assess effectiveness.

The process of developing this strategy has been useful. We had a Facebook page for a number of years but were uncertain how to use it. We posted only sporadically and haphazardly. It wasn't clear how a page for a professional organization should or could be different from a personal page. But by conducting an audit and reviewing the content posted by other comparable units of the university, we were able to identify a set of academically relevant messages that would meet departmental goals and objectives for a variety of audiences and create a calendar that will motivate us to post regularly.

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