

Social media outcomes in academia: engage with your audience and they will engage with you.

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Social media is a great tool for sharing information, collaborating on research and interacting with a global audience. But [Jessica Woolman](#) argues that we need to implement university-wide policies to mitigate risk, strategize where possible, and track the return on investment. By focusing on objectives and strategy, we can be more efficient, effective and engaging on social media.



Social media is no longer an emerging fad – it is here to stay. As Erik Qualman, author of [Socialnomics](#) aptly states, “We don’t have a choice on whether we do social media. The choice is how well we do it.” How do you know if your social media efforts are successful? And what does this mean in an academic setting?

Implementing social media

First things first – find out if your university has existing social media guidelines. Most universities have policies or guidelines, and some even have social media governing groups with various campus stakeholders. Even if you already have an account – for yourself, your research unit, faculty or library – it’s never too late to adopt best practices.

These policies should outline everything you need to know to mitigate risks, challenges and issues that arise on social media. Effectively triaging complaints, inquires and/or misguided information is a necessity, as most people expect immediate responses on social channels. This example from [EDUniverse](#) is similar to the one we use. Learning how to respond can be crucial for your reputation – we often receive complaints or questions that our unit does not know how to answer, but we make an effort to find the answer and respond quickly.

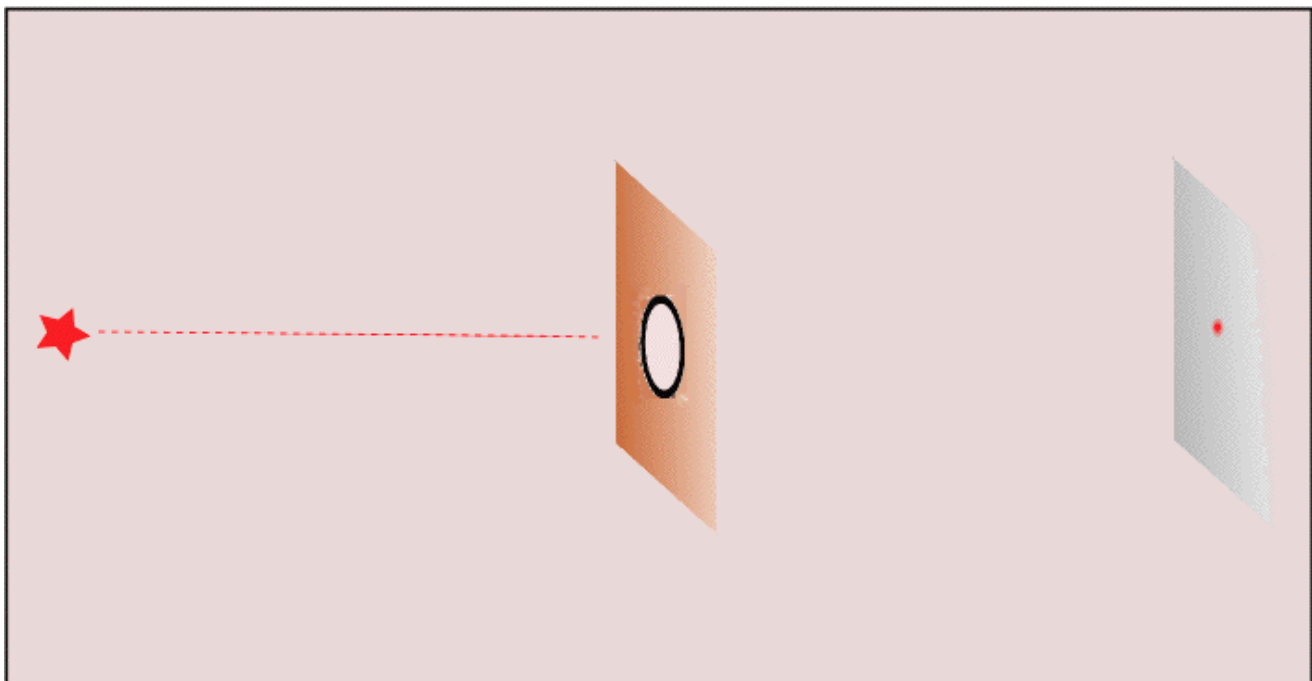


Image credit: Narrowing in on certainty [CC BY-SA 3.0 Patrick Edwin Moran Wikimedia](#)

The University of British Columbia (UBC) central Communications and Marketing Office developed guidelines in 2011 in collaboration with units across campus. These [social media guidelines](#) are detailed and specific, right down to branding requirements for avatars. The avatars have a common look and feel, which is great for students or staff who may not recognize or know the differences between units on campus.

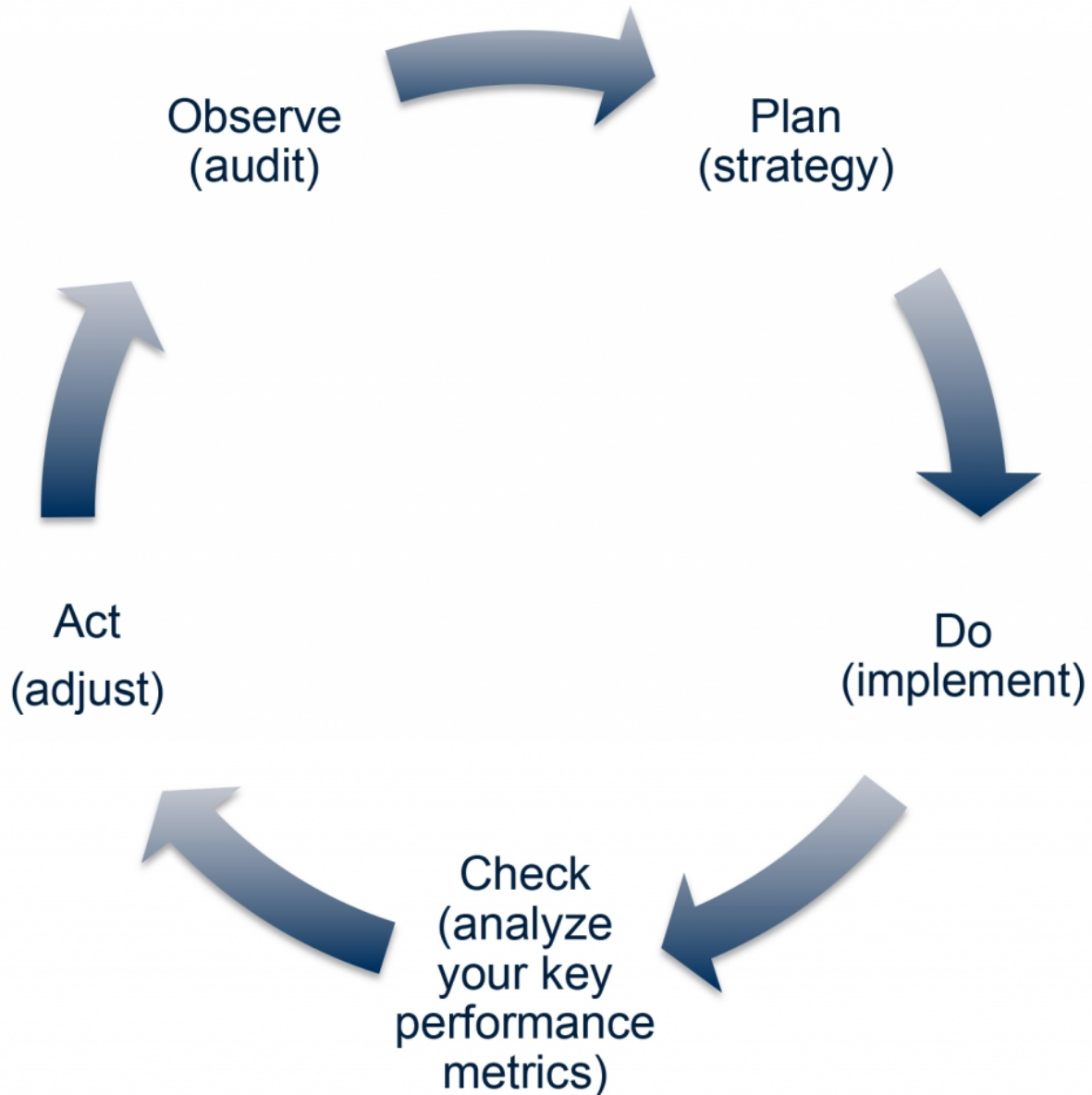
In addition to the broader university-wide guidelines, UBC Library adopted specific guidelines to use across our 15 branches. This includes everything from basic workflow to advice on how often to use social media channels. We also provide editorial/style guidelines to maintain consistency across multiple channels. For emergencies, we also have contact information for each account so we can quickly get in touch with the channel owner or primary author. This level of planning is crucial to mitigate risk in the event of a serious crisis on campus.

Strategy

It's okay to admit that you started a social media account without any strategy or specific goals. However, you should consider whether you're getting any kind of return on your investment. For some academics, this may seem too corporate and formal. But in truth – the one investment people seem to forget is your time. Your time is money. So before you spend ten hours a week looking at trending topics in your research area – think about your social media outcomes.

I hear from many people who opened an account simply because “everyone is using Twitter.” Knowing your target audience is a crucial step – and it may be that the people you want to reach aren't using the same channel you are. Undergraduate students may use Facebook more, while postdocs and researchers use Twitter and other tools. Really stop and think: Do you want to share research? Develop a network for feedback? Tell people about your projects?

Once you've figured out your audience, and what you want to do, you'll need an action plan. Neal Schaffer, author of [Maximize Your Social](#), has a simple, easy to follow plan that works great for UBC Library: Plan (strategy), Do (implement), Check (analyze), and Act (adjust). Essentially, come up with a few objectives, do it, look at the results, and adjust when/if you need to. Once a year, audit your channels to see if there are ones you haven't been using, and don't be afraid to close them if you aren't getting good results.



When setting measurable goals (for example: to increase engagement with open access scholars), try identifying key influencers that can help you reach this goal. In an academic setting, this could be as simple as looking at research centres on your campus, reaching out to different departments, or looking at organizations and institutions that have already partnered with your university.

Developing content

At UBC Library, we developed an editorial calendar to plot content themes throughout the year – this is particularly helpful for keeping track of what activities are happening across the Library branches, as well as across campus. We then check in with weekly and monthly reports to see which high-level topics received the most reach or traction. Based on this level of engagement, we can then adjust for the next week or month. This is especially helpful when trying something new. Do experiment, but look at your analytics to see if you need to adjust – are [posts with images performing better](#)? Should you include more videos?

Wherever possible, we also try to engage in campaigns at the university, city or provincial level. For example, UBC started a back to school campaign inviting students to share their stories on social media. We crafted tweets and pictures that tied in to this theme, and received higher than average reach for our content. We shared the messages

across the Library to our branches, which increased our engagement.

Your editorial calendar should also include the finicky details – who will be posting, how will you post (via the platform? pre-scheduled using [Hootsuite?](#)), and when/how will you be observing or responding? Remember not to use social media in exclusion. Make sure your website, blog, brochures, etc., are up-to-date, integrated and linked to your social media messaging.

Effective measurement: Why? What? How?

Most people are obsessed with the easy metrics – such as how many new followers they have. In actuality, this isn't nearly as important as your sentiment, reach/impressions or even overall growth. Having a small percentage of really active, engaged followers/fans adds up to a better return on investment than having thousands of followers. Basic metrics can tell you about your audience demographics, what time of day they are online, and give you information about when and what to post. We use Google Analytics to track referrals and website traffic, and Hootsuite reports for basic growth statistics. [sumall](#) is great for tracking shares, mentions and overall reach.

WHAT

These are our Key Performance Indicators, or KPIs.

Quantitative

Growth

Followers, fans

Content Types

Video, text, links, images

Amount of Content

2-4 times per day

Shares

RT's, shares, downloads, repins

Faves

Favourites, likes

Referrals

Click-throughs to our website

Qualitative

Personality

Tone, consistency

Key messages

Branding, positioning

Topics

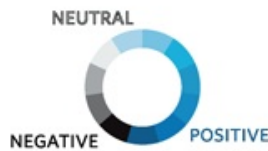
Resources, news, fun

Mentions

Hashtags, conversations

Sentiment

Positive, neutral, negative



WHEN

Weekly

Faves

Mentions

Are people responding in a positive, negative or neutral way?

Shares

Content Types

Amount of Content

Are we consistent?

Monthly

Growth

Shares

Are we engaged?

Referrals

Are we driving traffic?

Topics

What is popular?

Key messages

Are we providing content for all audiences?

Quarterly

Cumulative growth, shares

Sentiment tracking

Type of content

Yearly

Audit of all channels: include websites, digital signage, social media, etc. Looks specifically at what is being said, and to whom. We analyse content across all branches, system-wide. Especially important is finding our key influencers, Klout, and keeping track of our sentiment insights.



Jessica Woolman. "Getting the right results with social media." Canadian Library Association Conference, May 2014.

Engaging on social media

If a person were blasting a boombox at full volume in a public space, it would seem inappropriate and weird, yet we do this every day on social media. Most of us are blasting ("Look at my event!") and forgetting about the social part – the conversation.

The rules are quite simple – engage with your audience and they'll engage with you. Engagement can be defined in many different ways – start small: getting likes on your content. Then move towards asking questions, getting replies; sharing information and starting discussions. Make an effort to like other people's content, share their information when appropriate, and you'll see a positive return.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [Comments Policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

About the Author

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