Leveraging Social Media for School Communication and Marketing

Okwerede Emmanuel

College of Economics, Kampala International University, Uganda

ABSTRACT

The adoption of social media by schools has revolutionized communication and marketing in the education sector. This study investigates how platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter facilitate engagement with students, parents, staff, and the broader community. It examines the benefits of social media in creating a sense of community, enhancing school identity, and fostering transparency. Strategies for effective social media use are outlined, including developing clear goals, identifying target audiences, and crafting engaging and authentic content. The importance of analytics in measuring success and refining strategies is also discussed. Through case studies, the research highlights best practices and actionable insights for schools to optimize their social media presence and communication strategies.
Keywords: Social Media, School Marketing, Educational Communication, Community Engagement.

INTRODUCTION

In the education sector, many institutions have sought ways to actively use social media for a variety of different purposes, and there is no exception to that trend in the market of education. Schools are increasingly turning to platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram as tools in school communications and marketing to share their "good news" and engage students, parents, and community members. This simple act of meeting potential students where they are constitutes outreach in addition to engagement. Social media platforms and tools allow schools the opportunity to access the incidental networks of potential students and parents, faculty, and adjuncts, as well as the "alumni" status updates about looking for that next class, without formally adhering to the business of soliciting their participation [1, 2]. In the past, the primary methods of communication in schools were between teachers and parents and were often two-way communications shared about homework or discipline. Now, schools can send out and receive information from students, parents, staff, and the larger community. No other technological innovation has changed the dynamics of school communications so quickly and completely as the rise of social media. A sense of "community" results from "the process of sharing knowledge, thoughts, and ideas. A community provides its members with encouragement, learning, support, and opportunity." A community involves "assisting others in a network, providing and receiving a benefit as a result of facilitated or non-facilitated helping." Because of new media and Web 2.0 trends highlighted with social media platforms, schools, and organizations, in general, are encouraged to go beyond just sharing "good news" about their programs to the point of fostering a sense of community and camaraderie among students, parents, faculty, and staff. Yet, with those Web 2.0 advantages come risks, challenges, and new legal considerations. Therefore, the trends of what we will call "school marketing 2.0" and "community facilitation" are first explored below [3, 4].

Benefits Of Social Media for Schools

Today, social media is being utilized not only on a personal level but also on a professional level. The emergence of Web 2.0 has generated a profound shift in the way people use the Internet. Individuals are no longer passive consumers of content aimed at them but now actively engage in discussing and co-creating content related to their lives, their business issues, their hobbies, and even their medical needs. The goal of social platforms is to engage students, staff, parents, and the local community. Social media

provides an opportunity to engage parents, students, and the local community through this form of media. At the same time, social networks greatly increase the ability to communicate in real time [5, 6]. There are a number of different uses for social media. In a school setting, social media can be used for things like posting updates about weather closures, announcing special events, and involving the school's community. Regardless of the exact use, social media can hold the hand of the user and walk them through the steps needed to engage the system on their terms. Such media can either stay private and hidden for a more intimate type of communication, or they can lay all the workings of the school bare for all to see. There are, however, a variety of benefits to using social media for the school. Administrators are able to get information to parents in real time, organize community events that include parents, increase school identity, and engage students. The social media space is also a great way to reach a larger population without the higher prices of traditional marketing and as a tool to develop relationships with current and future students and families. Curating a community of supporters is increasing the goal of education, and social media is a good way to work toward that goal. Social media, which often seems against us in business and education, is not the boogeyman. It is a tool that is most effective when used according to a plan, included in a budget, and efficient in its design [7, 8].

Creating a Social Media Strategy for Schools

Social media is an essential part of the communications and marketing strategy for most schools. For those who are just starting on this journey, begin by developing a social media strategy for your school. Developing the strategy should follow these steps: Define your purpose and objectives. The strategy will guide your activities on social media, so it has to form the foundation for those activities. Get everyone familiar with and excited about what's happening on social media. Make sure your social media strategy is not in conflict with the school's mission and vision. Determine what other strategic decisions have been made around school branding, marketing, and messaging as they will inform your message and engagement strategy for social media. It is important to have a clear understanding of who your audience is to appropriately develop a message and engagement strategy for them. Who visits your school web page and who engages with the school on social media? Who are you trying to reach and how do you get to them? This is the time to familiarize yourself with stakeholder maps for schools. Another consideration is to review where your stakeholders might get information. Are there other private or public pages or feeds that might help get your message out? [9, 10]. Determine what you want to communicate: Do you want to focus on sharing the wonderful accomplishments of your students, publish news releases to keep your community informed on the business side of your school, or focus on more telling stories supported by your school and communities? What's important is that you choose an avenue that inspires your school's administration and faculty to take fantastic pictures and videos of what's going on at school because you need fresh content every day. Consider where your students and, if applicable, target parents go for their daily upload of what's happening in every corner of the world. Ensure you have a strong understanding of the different platforms and begin your project on the simplest one, then start integrating the others. More platforms will create more work, so begin in stages. Also, be sure to take note of best practices for posting to social media to ensure you have adequate resources set apart to publish. Experiment with your messaging that supports your communication strategy. Look for information to help you determine what kind of messages are most successful with your target audience. Look to build strong engagement with your audience. Ensure a strong schedule for your postings. Maintain flexibility and responsiveness. Platforms change in popularity very quickly. Keep abreast of what is working and not working, and pivot accordingly. Generally, a commitment of up to three hours a day should be expected to create content and then to monitor, curate, and respond to comments and questions [11, 12].

Identifying Target Audience

Schools need to be clear about who we want to talk to when it comes to social media, and that's about marketing most directly to our prospective students and indirectly to the other publics. We need an understanding of the audience and possible strategies to reach them, understanding how to present that information in terms of the kind of content that's going to attract their attention and hold their attention, and then how do we get them to share it with their friends. Part of that process is doing effective market segmentation, conducting some demographic analysis of our prospective students, where they live and what they read, and targeting some of our efforts specifically to the interests and concerns of those different groups. The target market typically includes students who are 50-plus and those looking at undergraduate programs. We think about international students, primarily in terms of undergraduate studies. We also want to consider transfer students who are probably in that age group but are likely quite sophisticated in terms of the decisions they're making about science or other activities, and we always think about parents who are funding these college educations. So, we know those are our primary

audiences. We need to listen to our audiences, think about our market, and adapt to that. If necessary, we should take the campaign down and rebuild it, but if you really listen and you're on the pulse of that information, you can maybe prevent a really bad backlash.

Creating Engaging Content for Social Media

Specific content marketing strategies are necessary to keep followers and prospective students engaged. The following are some best practices for engaging content.

- Relevance of Content: Content should be timely and represent the current culture of the school. In a season of online learning and social distancing, try to produce content that reflects the experience of our students and our campus. Content should be personally relevant to our students, prospective students, and their families [13].

- Authenticity: Content should portray a true and authentic experience and be genuine. Unrealistic or misleading content can have a negative impact on our school's reputation. We should strive to find a strong balance between attractive candid shots of campus and students along with high-quality produced images [14].

- Stay on Brand Voice: Content should utilize our brand voice. Content should follow our editorial guidelines for grammar, punctuation, capitalization, etc.

- Posting Frequency and Message Consistency: If possible, post something different each day to keep your followers engaged. If you are posting something important, reiterate the message at different times of day to reach different audiences [15].

- Interactive Content: Use social media to the fullest extent. Leverage interactive content—ask questions, use polls, and use CTAs wherever possible. Create genuine opportunities to engage. Interactive posts will produce the greatest engagement. Posts that ask followers to share their favorite something or their experiences often get great engagement [16].

- Storytelling: We crave stories. Are there stories of our staff, faculty, or students that would be of interest to tell? Storytelling brings an emotional component and helps others to see themselves in that story. What challenges have they overcome? Storytelling emphasizes a relatable experience of human transformation and growth. Prompting stories from others in our content helps to facilitate communal growth [17].

- Diversify Content Form/Format: Recognize that the average attention span for quality screen time is about 8 seconds. With that in mind, our content form includes videos, moving text, animated GIFs, Instagram stories, and infographics. We should always use video captioning for all videos posted on social media to ensure all followers have access to content [18].

- Timing and Frequency: The best time to post on Instagram is Wednesday at 11 AM and Friday from 10 AM to 11 AM. These are not hard and fast rules and may not work for every school. We want to reach potential students and their families, but we also want to reach prospective employers and the community. We should set up a posting schedule to reach out to these different audiences [19].

Visual Content Strategies

Engagement and social media success are significantly and measurably improved by incorporating visual elements within your content posts. Visual elements are critical since engagement drops dramatically for posts that are made of only text. Social media is a visual tool; as a result, our posts need to be visually appealing. There are many types of visuals you can include in your social media content posts. Sharing event highlights and student showcases are especially strong content posts that feature many pictures of the emotion and excitement of our school community. Potential methods are to feature pictures of student work for elementary, work in the classroom for secondary classrooms, and general event highlights for each [20]. Promotional graphics and videos should also be shared regularly through social media to promote brand identity and community involvement. These posts highlight accomplishments and programs that make your school a standout choice. There are many free online tools for creating visually appealing graphics, videos, presentations, and more. Infographics and icons can also add a lot of interest and detail to your content graphics. Always use the "Publish Preview" function to look out for any emotional, highly saturated colors that your school community members with visual or learning impairments might have issues with. Also, remember to use the "Alt Text" feature when uploading images to the web content editor that describes the photo for our visually impaired audience. Pictures of a presentation can be collaged and shapes filled with infographics from small icon pictures. They do have similar capabilities when it comes to editing photos, text options, or manipulating or airbrushing photographs. Having a visual, video, or graphic immediately draws the eye and slows down the reader. As a result, making visual content is worth it. When making any graphical post, remember to brand it with

your organization's logos. Always try to use pictures that tell a story—imagine a backstory to the photo. Whether your content visually shows students working, a new initiative in action, or promotes a special event success, visual storytelling makes your connection point needed to pull personal feelings [21].

Measuring Success and Analytics

Despite overwhelming evidence of the importance of effectively leveraging social media for school communication, marketing, and everything in between, there remains one factor that might prevent schools from engaging in it. It is not a lack of interest; it is a lack of understanding as to whether or not utilizing social media works. So how do we measure success when it comes to schools and social media? Two words: analytics and effectiveness [22]. First, and most importantly, no school can have the necessary understanding of whether or not they are reaching their audiences (and whether or not those audiences are responding) without utilizing the analytics available to them through each social media platform. Most social media tools will allow you to see how many people a post reached, how many people engaged with your content, which people did the engaging (including demographics and location, among other available metrics), and a plethora of other useful data points. For the schools committed to going above and beyond, comprehensive third-party analytics software is also available to give you a 360-degree view of your social performance. Combining these insights with your KPIs should inform the approach you take for each platform, down to the content that is being shared and the way it is being communicated. In summary, the general point is schools need to have an understanding of what kinds of content are connecting with their audience so that they can duplicate success. If you're consistently testing different approaches and content, you'll constantly be getting closer to understanding what works with your audience. With no investment in analytics, you're throwing a bunch of things at the wall and not looking to see what sticks [23]. Determining your KPIs is important because it sets the framework for the strategy you'll use when evaluating your performance. If your goal is to grow your social following, for example, your KPIs will likely include several new followers, follower growth rate, ad reach, relevance gradient, and your average audience as a whole. Other KPIs could include things like post clicks, post reactions, video views, social media shares, shares of link clicks, time spent on posts, comments, and overall frequency of trading content. These social media metrics can be viewed on each platform and offer insight into the audience's behavior, but should also be used to justify the strategy you've decided upon. Did you decide to make Instagram a focus because you saw that the engagement is the highest on that platform? Then you'll want to measure desirability, which accounts for engagement. It's also important to validate your platform strategy periodically, to see if it is still the most effective way to communicate with your audience. You're building a data-driven marketing strategy around your goals and KPIs, and your social media approach should follow these guidelines as well. After all, holding your strategies accountable is a feedback loop and can foster a culture of data-driven decision-making in your school community [24].

Key Metrics to Track

The first thing to look at is your engagement metrics. These measure how well your content is engaging your audience. Standard engagement metrics include things like page likes, the number of comments on a post, the number of times a post was shared, and things like overall reach or impressions. It's important to weigh these metrics against the size of your audience so that you can get an idea of how much a piece of content has caught your audience's attention. While social media is not the only medium for measuring your brand's overall performance, looking at these engagement metrics is a great way to get an idea of how much exposure your brand is getting. In that same vein, it's worth looking at the number of people who are following your page. The number of followers you have not only indicates your brand's relevance to internet users; it also shows how many people are interested in what you have to say [25]. Click-through rates are another consideration. If you posted on social media about an event that you want online visitors to attend, did follow-through match your goals there? Another great content payoff that comes back to content creators is your use of hashtags. If you have a custom campaign to promote an upcoming admission open house or back-to-school event, there will likely be a unique hashtag in use. Look at the number of times it was used to gauge the success of overall interest and interaction in the event. While data mining seems like the obvious way to go in planning how to gear up for pulling off the best events ever, do take into consideration the qualitative feedback you get, too. A good mix of hard data intermixed with a big dash of community sentiment will give you the best lay for deepening your understanding of your school's Facebook congregation. Study these stats on a semi-periodic basis to "take the temperature" of your audience and then adapt your editorial strategy to reflect what these trends are spelling out [26].

Case Studies and Success Stories

This paper outlined several success stories. It's important to read through them all and then choose the ones you'll find are most relevant to your school or project. They can be used for promotional material; to showcase the breadth and depth of our social media activity and the different ways we've showcased Oxford in the past, and as a draft for a case study [27].

'In Conversation' At St John's College with Stephen Fry and Emma Smith

The St John's social media activity for the 'In Conversation' event faced the usual challenges of engaging staff and students. Throughout the multiple marketing campaigns, videos, and the live stream, nearly 3.5 million people have engaged with the social media activity produced in just four months. Emphasis was placed on putting the event on in Sutton Trust universities and the message underlying all activity was that St John's was 'opening up Oxford'. Key strengths were the audience engagement and the sheer scale of activity [28].

Key takeaways: make the most of your capacity as a 'testing ground' to demonstrate the possibilities of social media, employ students to produce professional social media content, cater to the up-and-coming platforms, spend in the right places and commercial message, consider the integration of students within marketing efforts. Challenges faced: getting live content seen, and getting events content seen more widely [29].

Summary: St John's has been able to expand its 'In Conversation' series beyond the Fellows involved, reaching out to a wide range of audiences across multiple countries. Use the activity of this series to promote St John's globally: working with Fellows, students, and world-renowned personalities. Work with students to allow St John's to achieve higher-end social media listening and engagement. St John's had exceptional monthly reach via social media in the month of launch: Twitter: 1,202,349; Facebook: 1,545,345; Instagram: 1,209,978 [30]. What happened on the day? Launch day in Oxford – pushing the term 'Sutton Trust 13' across all platforms. Before launch day, a message and a piece of film were created with Stephen Fry and Emma Smith being interviewed about getting excited for the event. This was set against iconic images from Oxford, framed as an informative set to take us from the press release to the Oxford activity happening on the ground. This message was posted to all platforms on the day of launch. On Twitter, the piece was posted in four slots across the day. On Facebook, a 30-second trailer and the long-form piece were posted, and on Instagram, a 15-second trailer version.

CONCLUSION

Social media has emerged as an indispensable tool for schools to communicate effectively, engage their communities, and enhance their marketing efforts. By leveraging platforms strategically, schools can reach diverse audiences, promote transparency, and build a strong sense of community. However, success hinges on a well-crafted strategy that aligns with institutional goals, employs targeted content, and incorporates robust analytics. As demonstrated in various case studies, schools that embrace innovation, authenticity, and responsiveness in their social media approaches can achieve significant impact. Future efforts should focus on continual adaptation to evolving digital trends, ensuring sustainable and meaningful engagement.

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