

So You're on Facebook

What's the

Message?

The questions heard most often today among community college marketing colleagues involve social media. How do you get on Facebook or Twitter or LinkedIn? How do you manage a blog? How do you integrate the new social media with other promotional strategies? Who should organize and monitor social media?

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Social Media Is Just Another Marketing Tool

First, however, you need to remember that social media is just another TOOL – one part of your entire arsenal of promotional strategies that includes everything from print publications and press releases to Web sites and special events. Keep in mind, too, that just a few years back, everyone was asking many of the same questions about building a college Web site. The technicians helped get it up, linked and running, but the marketing practitioners had to consider how to make the marketing message effective.

So What Is Your Message?

Creating effective messages in the world of social media should be your highest priority. Start with the basics. Identify what benefits you want your audiences to know – and remember – about your institution. Then, strategically select and frame your postings and your tweets to regularly communicate those benefits.

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Joliet Junior College in Illinois, for example, focuses on quality and routinely recognizes interesting and outstanding alumni. In addition, the college regularly highlights faculty accomplishments. Recently, when mentioning a faculty member featured in a newspaper story, the college got several “like this” clicks, including a comment that said, “Hey, that’s my professor! Way to go!”

Interesting college-wide events or activities can also be promoted, and when they involve particular programs, you can provide links to appropriate articles or videos that elaborate on that program.

Be Interactive!

One of the biggest advantages of social media – and perhaps the biggest challenge – is the immediacy of the message. While you want to encourage interaction by posting information and questions that your audience can respond to, you must remember to monitor comments and follow up quickly and appropriately.

One college recently posted a seemingly innocuous message on Facebook announcing that registration was starting online for returning students. Twenty-three responses to that message popped up, with many expressing frustration that it took two hours to register and the system only worked after midnight. What’s needed is an immediate answer, something like, “That’s not the standard we expect, and we’ll check into it immediately and fix it.” And then you need to do so.

Harper College, also in Illinois, took a risk by writing this on Facebook: “We want to know what you think about the school. This is your place to interact with your school, and we’re all ears.” When that generated a complaint about a \$30 drop fee, the marketing director immediately thanked the student for the comment and said he’d check with the registrar and get back to him. After all was said and done, the student posted this: “Thanks for passing on my message. The business office contacted me and I had a very pleasant conversation with them ... I appreciate your help.”

The Good, The Bad and The Ugly

In your quest to encourage active participation on Facebook or Twitter, you have to take the good with the bad. Yes, you’re likely to get some negative comments, but the positive feedback goes a long way. One college’s simple post of “Welcome back” at the beginning of a semester generated a lot of positive comments, and another college got overwhelmingly positive feedback when it asked people to share how the college had impacted their lives.

Whether the feedback is positive or negative, one of the things you need to accept about social media is that you can’t control it. Today’s disgruntled student can tell the world about it with the push of a button. And, whether you’re there or not, people will likely be talking about you, so it’s best to get in on the discussion. (This is exactly why you don’t want to have “no comment” for the media. Others will comment, and your view will be missing.) Once you see where discussions are going, you have the ability to answer concerns. Likewise, you have the ability to influence the kinds of conversations that take place by strategically planning what you will be posting.

Are You Paying Attention to the Full Marketing Mix?

Finally, you must remember that promotion is only one of the four P’s of marketing. In an educational setting, the other P’s – product, place and price – involve such things as curriculum, student services, recruitment, inquiry follow-up, retention and research.

As marketing professionals, you don’t have control over all these areas, but you should involve people from those areas when developing and implementing social media strategies and other strategies in your marketing plan. This is what makes it truly integrated. And always remember that no matter what new technology hits next, the message and your brand are still the basics of what you should be communicating, regardless of the tools you use.

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