Social-Media Platforms and Marketing of Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract
The paper introduces the reader to social media as a marketing tool in the first section, then investigates the motivation behind using social media. In the following section it delves into basic and recommended strategies for successful marketing in these new online mediums, while focusing on their application in higher education institutions. In the last two sections two top ranked universities' social media presence is presented and analyzed, and lastly there is a discussion about the necessity and the means of measuring and tracking the effect of social media marketing.

Keywords: Social media marketing, Higher education, social media measurement

JEL classification: M31

1. Introduction: A new marketing power

Social media is a growing phenomenon across all age groups, ethnicities, sexes, countries and regions and has been fuelled by the rapid expansion of the internet and of 'smart' devices. It has been changing some parts of business and education, yet it is still growing and its' final impact is unknown. A recent article suggests that the number of social network users will be growing to almost 3 billion by 2020 (Statista, 2014).

Universities, as most individuals and organizations, are leveraging this tool for marketing purposes. Extremely interested in proper use of this new type of web, as 16-24 year olds are most active on social media (ofcom, 2014), universities still lack clear guidelines (as most of the business worlds also lacks guidelines for proper social media usage). The aim of this paper is to bring up the main points of a social media presence, along with a brief description of these new and popular channels by studying and comparing the most successful colleges that have adopted this marketing paradigm.

1.1. Main social media channels
The most important tools of this 'new web' are social networking sites, blogs, microblogs, video sharing sites, photo sharing sites, review sites and social bookmarking sites. Social media is quite varied and for every type of social media there are at least 2-3 important and similar sites (Facebook, vkontakte, xingxing; YouTube, vimeo, metacafe etc.). To my opinion, the channels listed are the most important and contain newcomers which will have the most significant growth in the near future.
Social networking sites

This is the most common and, probably, the most well-known category (due to Facebook). Social networks, otherwise known as social networking services, can be defined as *"web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system"* (Boyd and Ellison, 2007).

Defining such a complex entity is difficult, yet the central theme of SNS (social networking sites) is, without question, communication. More specifically, dialogue, interaction and connection. It gives its users the feeling of being part of a community, the prehistoric need of belonging to a group, a "tribe". As Seth Godin so wonderfully explained in his book (Godin, 2008), we still have a tendency to form groups based on our passions, hobbies, products we are passionate about, etc.

The most important social networking sites, by number of worldwide unique monthly visitors (Chaffey, 2016) are Facebook with: 1.59 billion, Qzone with 640 million, Tumblr with 555 million, Instagram with 400 million and Twitter with 320 million. Instant messaging apps are also included in this ranking but they do not fit the classic definition of social networking sites.

Blogs

Blogs, short for weblogs, are a very popular platform for expressing thoughts, idea leadership and establishing yourself as a thought leader/influencer. The most popular blogs are not written by a single individual, but are actually multi-author blogs, so-called `congregator` blogs. A few of these top blogs are (estimated and ranked by ebizMBA, 2014b) Huffington Post (110,000,000 estimated unique monthly visitors), Business Insider (25,500,000 estimated unique monthly visitors), Mashable (23,000,000 estimated unique monthly visitors), Gizmodo (21,500,000 estimated unique monthly visitors), TechCrunch (12,500,000 estimated unique monthly visitors, Engadget (12,000,000 estimated unique monthly visitors) and Kotaku (10,000,000 estimated unique monthly visitors). The global alexarank of these sites, mainly based on estimated unique daily visitors is: 153 – Huffington Post, 311 – Business Insider, 416 – Gizmodo, 475 – Engadget, 482 – Mashable.com, 556 – TechCrunch and 943 Kotaku.

Microblogs

A microblog is a way of communicating short, on point messages (usually 140 characters). Great for news and interesting snippets, twitter and twitter copies have become a staple various TV shows, which have sometimes even completely cut and pasted the "tweet" system into their website for live coverages of ongoing news. Microblogs are also used as ways of piquing the interest of the target audience and ultimately bringing them to the main site/channel. According to an online article (Shiwangi, 2014) which used Alexa Rank and Google Page Rank, the top two microblog sites are: Twitter (the original microblog, which limits posts to 140 characters in order to make the site mobile-friendly) and Tumblr (which is now mostly based on gifs and photo/video content though it does have a short text component). There are a number of similar sites which also have a very high Alexa rank, including Yammer, which is the business/corporate version of twitter that aims to increase business productivity.

Video sharing sites

An online research shows that video sharing sites are extremely popular among young adults (Guimaeres, 2014), with the main reasons for usage being "Social Need" and "Leisure & Entertainment" (Wang, 2014).

YouTube is the most popular of the video sharing sites, with more than 1 billion users, and the most reach than any other cable network(in the US) for ages 18-49 and also 80% of its user base located outside of the USA (youtube,2014).

With an Alexa Rank of 2 both globally and for America (Google is first), YouTube is one of the sites that have shaped this generation. People used to store ever-increasing amounts of

music in digital format, on their hard disks and have playlists with thousands of songs; one of the reasons the iPod was revolutionary was the fact that it allowed even more songs than a usual Walkman cd player for storing and on-the-go playback. Currently, 80% of Americans use an on-demand music streaming services such as Spotify or YouTube (Nielsen, 2016). Furthermore, the number of teens that use sites such as YouTube in favor of old-fashioned physical storage of albums is even bigger, with the 2010 figure at 64% (Kerr, 2010)

It's only normal that companies have turned to YouTube for advertising. A couple of years ago the most used buzzword for social media marketing on YouTube was "viral". Viral videos were the golden goose which every advertising agency hoped and wished for. Now viral videos are still sought after, but organizations are taking a more long-term, balanced approached towards YouTube marketing; sponsorships are also quite popular, with companies giving out products to well-known vloggers (video bloggers) that review products for a living.

While YouTube is the most popular video sharing site, it is just one of many. Vimeo, Veoh, video.yahoo.com, dailymotion.com, metacafe.com, break.com, viddler.com, blip.tv and howcast are other very popular YouTube competitors. Some video sharing sites are free, some are paid and some have central themes such as howcast, which features how-to videos.

Another subcategory of video sharing sites are streaming sites. While it is true that YouTube has a live streaming feature, twitch is actually the most popular self-standing site for video streaming, mostly due to its focus on game streaming

The most recent, and most representative of social media sites that has gained a lot of traction recently is Vine, a site with corresponding mobile applications that lets users post extremely short videos. The most popular short videos shared on this site, called "vines", are comedic in nature.

Photo sharing sites

Another category that has taken off recently, photo sharing sites are very popular not only among photo enthusiasts, but also among regular users which use them for storing and showcasing. The most popular sites are flickr.com, Photobucket, DeviantArt, shutterfly, ImageShack and smugmug.com. Some of these are free, while others require subscriptions. Most organizations that use social media also have a presence on a photo sharing site.

The newcomers, truly representative sites for social media in this category are Instagram and Snapchat. Instagram is a social network based on the mobile app which encourages expression through photographs which have been tweaked through a multitude of filters and artistic processes. The strong surge in smartphone ownership coupled with the high quality of smartphone cameras have propelled this network into the social media top of networks and ended up in an acquisition by Facebook for 1 billion dollars in cash and equity. It is worth mentioning that Instagram now also supports video, and Twitter also supports inline video and photo, trying to compete with these social media networks which are powerhouses in their respective categories.

Snapchat is similar to Instagram, with its main, distinguishing feature being that the messages disappear from the servers and the recipient's phone after some time.

Review sites

Review sites are another reason why social media is so powerful, and this generation of Internet-connected customers has a much stronger voice and presence than in the past. Sites and apps such as Yelp, Foursquare, TripAdvisor Foodspotting, etc. have changed the way consumers interact with organizations. While, in the past, organizations had the upper hand when it came to their image (both online and offline), now that image is very much in the hands of consumers (organizations still have a saying in this, but the balance of power has shifted towards individual consumers). With online reviews, the ability to complain anywhere — especially since almost every social media site has introduced a check in and review function

— means that companies can no longer afford to stay out of the dialogue while betting on heavy advertising and consumer ignorance.

Organizations are now forced to at least acknowledge, if not solve a customer's grievance, and they must do so in a very narrow time frame, as this instant gratification age has shortened everyone's patience, attention span and definitions of what "timely" means. In social media, timely is a few hours, 24 at most. Otherwise, the snowball effect can transform something bad into something horrible by virtue of the interconnected and always online nature of the internet (considering global businesses which always have fans online, even if it's nighttime in the country where they are based).

Social bookmarking sites

Sites such as Delicious, Digg, Stumbleupon, and Pinterest have the purpose of organizing and sharing resources for a specific topic. Professionals can use these to organize themselves and also promote materials by adding it to their bookmarks list.

The latest entry and most spectacular one in this group is Pinterest, which is focused on curating, and not necessarily creating photos. Pinterest is based on a "board" system, where users "pin" photos on a board, thereby curating an album with a specific theme. Compared to the photo sharing sites, Instagram is more about personal expression and connecting with others, in the way Facebook is, while Pinterest is more of a google for photos on Do-it-yourself, for inspiration when decorating, fashion, etc. While based on photographs, Pinterest fits the description of social bookmarking sites.

We consider Pinterest to be one of the top 5 social media sites most used by companies right now, even though it's so new. Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube and Pinterest are the 5 which are staples on almost all corporate or institutional websites when searching for social media channels.

Other social media sites

An honorable mention goes to sites that empower individuals to sell their crafts online on an easy-to-use platform. Etsy, this online store for hand crafted and artisan items uses the power of the web and smartphones to connect buyers and sellers.

Etsy is the biggest store of this kind, with a reported 40 million members in June 2014(Statista, 2014), but there are others such as BigWanda, Shopify, quirky (which is unique in that it focuses on designing and using a voting system to create the winning designs), Bonanza, Folksy (only UK), Artfire, etc. This category could be called Consumer to Consumer, as app services like Uber, Etsy, AirBnB connect buyers with a large, sometimes worldwide audience. Another important category of sites that don't really qualify as social media marketing are crowdfunding sites such as kickstarter.com and Indiegogo.com. Here people can share their plans to create a certain object/product/movie/book/etc. and ask for funding. Contributors are usually rewarded with something, either a better price if they pre order the product or appearances in the game/movie/book, if they pay more than a certain amount.

1.2. Why are people using social media?

According to a recent survey (Mcgrath, 2014), the most important reasons for using online social networks are staying in touch with friends, staying up to date and filling up spare time (being entertained).
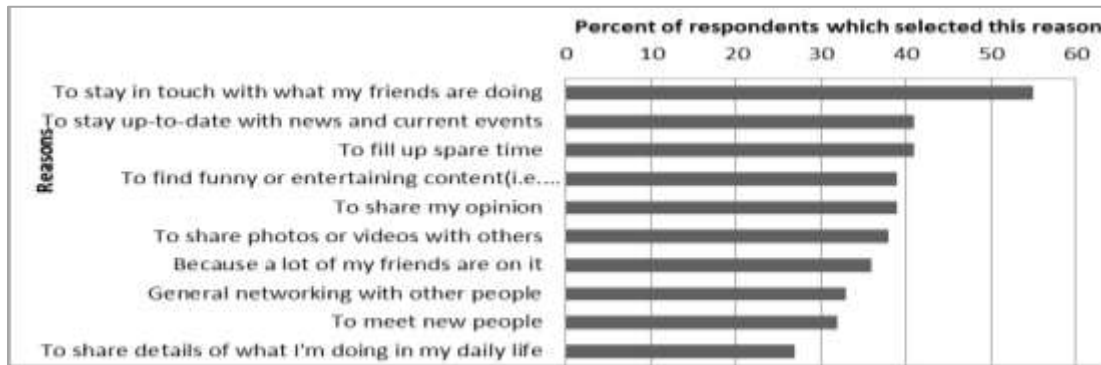
Figure 1. The reasons for using social media networks
Source: http://www.globalwebindex.net/blog/top-10-reasons-for-using-social-media , respondents aged 16-64

We can group these motives in 3 main categories: belonging/communication, entertainment and self-expression. As previously noted, this "me-me-me" generation (Stein, 2013) is quite engrossed in narcissism and self-expression, gets bored quickly (hence the need for entertainment) and suffers from much more peer pressure than the "me-generation" (baby boomers).

Another study included social capital as a motivation for using SNS (social networking services), where social capital is defined as *"the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition"*(Bourdieu and Wacquant,1992).

A very interesting breakdown of SNS usage motives is given by Sledgianowski and Kulviwat (2009), which identify 5 personality factors that are directly correlated with the intention to use and the actual usage of social networking sites:

- playfulness (*i.e.*, enjoyment and pleasure)
- the critical mass users who endorse the technology
- trust in the site
- perceived ease of use
- perceived usefulness

The study also adds that normative pressure (other people's expectations of one's behavior) had a negative relationship with the usage of online social networks.

In these 5 factors we can identify the need for entertainment (i.e.: playfulness) and belonging (i.e.: critical mass of endorsing users) but we must note the trust issue along with the perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness. Perceived usefulness is most interesting, because one could argue that perceived usefulness helps rationalize using an app focused on entertainment and "killing time" rather than actual business or work.

2. How are universities using social media?

Universities have been increasingly adopting social media as part of their marketing mix in the last couple of years. Some are better suited for video sharing sites (MIT), some make better use of the blogs and microblogs (Harvard) and some are just experimenting or have adopted these tools because of the competition.

2.1. Basic rules and guidelines in social media marketing

First of all, social media marketing is, like any marketing, based on a plan. No significant progress can be made unless the university is certain about its target market and its goal.

Does the university want more brand awareness, is it trying to gain image capital ("look cooler"), is it trying to expand its customer relationship service online, is it trying to promote its events and faculties? Different goals require different platforms and different approaches.

The next step, once a plan is established, is creating a social media policy for all the employees of the university. There are some great examples out there, such as Liberty University's social media toolkit (Liberty.edu, 2016) and Harvard's 'Guidelines for using Social Media' (Harvard University, 2016).

Hubspot recommends the following steps for universities embracing social media (Klamm, 2011):

• Develop a Strategy and Set Goals – as previously mentioned, no marketing is complete without a plan

• Pick and Choose Your Platforms – a great point that hubspot makes is that you can't just jump on all platforms, as this would be more detrimental than helpful. Social media is very time consuming and requires monitoring and a fast response time

• Empower and Support Individual Departments – if you can manage to attract and involve different departments and faculty members, you whole institution is working towards your goal on social media, without you having to spend more

• Put Guidelines in Place – people need guidelines, especially when interacting with the public in the name of the institution. Having guidelines also increases the comfort level of members who would otherwise feel threatened by this new marketing tool, and it also has value from a legal standpoint, protecting the institution from unwanted lawsuits

• Develop a Consistent Voice Across Platforms – As noted in Liberty's social media toolkit (Liberty, 2016), a consistent voice is tied in to a unified brand identity, a unified and known goal, and a unified communication style (though this need not apply to individual faculty members)

• Communicate Across Campus – This is one of the most important and overlooked necessities in social media. A cross-department team is needed in social media, as it will be a 'university spokesperson' and customer relations touchpoint with your customers at the same time, therefore people will ask about different aspects of the university and only a cross-department team will be able to answer these questions promptly, accurately and coherently. When facing actual or potential students (or other stakeholder categories), the higher education institution must show unity, team play and cooperation. This helps create an image of a highly functioning institution and also helps cut back time and energy spent on information searching between different university 'silos'.

Two very important building blocks of social media are monitoring and listening.

Listening is the act of paying attention to what people are saying about your university on social media and thus understanding them and the tone of the conversation, which will help you respond appropriately.

Monitoring is similar to listening, but must be permanent, as , in this global era, people are always having conversations about your university (i.e.: you have a global MBA program, there will always be potential students discussing it on the other side of the globe, even if in your country it's night time, holiday, etc.). Coming back to an earlier point, it's not wise to participate in all types of social media because people have become extremely impatient on these types of channels; they are checking them daily, hourly sometimes and expect your university to do the same and respond in what could be considered an unreasonable amount of time, otherwise your social media effort will work against you, stirring up frustration and negative feedback.

2.2. Top US universities in social media

The top universities in social media (in the US), as ranked by Engagement Labs (team eValue, 2016) are:

Figure 2. Top 50 US universities and Colleges on Facebook and Twitter

Source:https://www.engagementlabs.com/press/baylor-university-texas-am-university-and-university-of-wisconsin-madison-graduate-with-social-media-distinction/

2.3. University of Wisconsin-Madison and Texas A&M University — social media presence analysis

Texas A&M University has numerous Facebook accounts, from individual department/faculties accounts and sport-specific accounts (baseball, football, and athletics) to accounts for the library and dining services. It posts frequently, the minimum time between posts is a couple of hours and the maximum a couple of days. The content it shares include events, infographics about admissions, graduate satisfaction surveys, alumni achievements, university achievements and professor achievements. People are quite engaged with these posts, with like numbers in the thousands and shares+comments in the hundreds. It's quite interesting to see that the account holder responds to some of the comments, which suggests true listening and monitoring is taking place on their Facebook accounts. It's also interesting to note that except for their main page, their other pages vary in engagement considerably, with some being almost deserted during certain time frames, yet they still post regularly.

On Twitter, Texas A&M have an incredible presence. First of all, they have around 15 different accounts, including one for their career orientation center, and not to mention the Dog Mascot (Reveille IX) account. Their main account doesn't tweet daily, but when it does it tweets 5 to 10 times a day and the most important aspect is that it promotes the other social media channels as well(we found references to snapchat, Pinterest and periscope tv). With around 199 thousand followers, the topics addressed in the main account are quite diverse, yet sports-related ones produce the most engagement.

Pinterest is the social media platform where Texas A&M shines once again. With around 14,700 followers and 32 boards, it is remarkable to see how much branded merchandise the university carries. With ideas from how to decorate your room with A&M branded products to how to show your love and appreciation as an alumni, their Pinterest account has it all, from accessories to mugs. A special board is dedicated to studying tips, one to dorm life, one to

marriages in campus, one to the dining service. This is a really extraordinary Pinterest account which could use more cross-channel promotion, as 14,700 followers is a small amount, but understandable considering Pinterest's user demographics (which is mainly women in their 30's) and its currently small market share.

Texas A&M's YouTube consists of one main account and a few more accounts for departments. Their main strategy is to upload videos from interesting activities, such as football matches, research breakthroughs, but also life on campus, marching band songs, etc. They also curate videos made by other users, categorizing them on their YouTube channel. With a total of approximately 2, 1 million views and 8,355 subscribers on their main channel, their engagement is average, but expected from YouTube channel, with likes ranking from hundreds to thousands and comments in the 2 digit range.

The most viewed channel is their Texas A&M Athletics account, with 12,534,417 views and approximately 26,000 subscribers. Their main channels all have links to their other social media accounts in the 'about' page, though the department channels do not have all the links.

University of Wisconsin Madison's Facebook account has approximately 270,000 likes. Their sometimes post daily and sometimes leave a couple of days between posts. They have an average engagement rate, with post likes averaging around 1,700 and shares around the hundreds. From browsing their posts, only one mention of periscope.tv came up, and their main page only links YouTube and Instagram, which is quite unfortunate especially considering they came first on the eValue analytics in the twitter section. Their other accounts (mostly for different „schools"/departments) have a very low engagement rate and subscribers in the low thousands.

UWM's (University of Wisconsin Madison) main Twitter account has approximately 130,000 followers, yet their engagement rate revolves around under 100 retweets/favorites and a dozen or so comments per post. They are very active, with multiple tweets daily, yet some days go by without a tweet. Cross-linking to snapchat, YouTube and Facebook is common. As usual, football/sports tweets garner much more than the usual retweets/favorites (even as high as 300+). Their other twitter accounts are all but deserted, with average subscribers ranging in the 8000s but lots of post with almost no engagement (barely a dozen retweets).

UWM's Pinterest account is diverse, with 32 boards. It resembles the Texas A&M Pinterest account but the engagement rates are extremely low (most pins have under 10 repins). Its approximately 4,000 followers don't seem to be really interested in their university's Pinterest account.

With 4,489 subscribers and 2,267,943 views on YouTube, University of Wisconsin Madison's main channel is less about curated playlists and more about interesting videos like their fundraising efforts nicknamed „All ways forward", their candy making classes from the Food Science department or videos of their most successful alumni. Their other channels are much poorer in both views and subscribers. As far as social media integration, only one of the accounts has links to the other platforms, while most only have links to the google plus account. The regular engagement rate for their YouTube channel is under 10 likes, while views are somewhere in the low hundreds.

3. Social media metrics

As noted earlier, social media marketing is still a marketing effort and thus follows the basic marketing rules, one of which is to track the effectiveness of what you're doing. This can be ambiguous in social media, yet some basic, clear cut ways exist, such as key performance indicators.

Traffic data – How much referral traffic did your website/landing page generate from social media channels?

Followers/subscribers/likes/view – What is your follower count, and how many are liking and viewing your content?

Engagement – Are people commenting, retweeting, repinning, "favoriting", sharing your posts? Or are they passively viewing and perhaps liking/+1ing?

Certain software such as Google Analytics, Bit.ly, Hootsuite, Followerwonk, Hubspot and others offer many more interesting metrics, some free, some paid, but you can also generate your own.

For the more statistically inclined, social media ROI (return on investment) can be calculated according to a formula shared online by others or an in-house made formula. Schottmuller (2013) recommends calculating value by using equivalent pay per click value (Google ads) cost:

1. Social media mentions' value

Number of brand or product online social mentions,pins,etc.*(CPI)equivalent display ad impression costs= $ Display Ad Impressions Value

2. Referrals advertising value

Number of social referral clicks to website*$(CPC)equivalent display or social ad costs= $ Social Ad Value

The article (Schottmuller, 2013) presents many more useful formulas for calculating user-generated-content value compared to company paid content and other metrics; many social media analysts such as socialbakers, hubspot, sociagility, etc. have created their own engagement, ranking and ROI metrics. The problem with Schottmuller's formulas are they don't actually take into account the cost of labor, of producing the ads and managing the social media sites, therefore they don't calculate true ROI, which involves dividing the benefits to the costs.

Therefore when measuring social media ROI it is essential to use the cost involved to actively participate in these online platforms. Social media is not free, even without buying business accounts or sponsored posts. The main cost is labor time, though special software or hardware might also be an issue. Lee from buffer, a social media management app, shares an interesting way of calculating ROI by using lifetime value and actual web analytics (Lee, 2015). He suggests that a customer's conversion value is his lifetime value divided by your conversion rate.

$$\text{Customer conversion value} = \frac{\text{Customer Lifetime value}}{\text{number of views needed to gain one customer}}$$

In this example, if our conversion rate is 2% (1 in 50 people become customers), and we know that a customer's lifetime value is 1000$, then a customer's conversion value is 1000$/50=20$. Multiplying this number with all customers coming from social media gives us the "benefits" number for the ROI formula.

Furthermore, Lee(2015) suggests that costs for social media are divided into fees(promoting posts, sponsored content, etc.) and labor. Therefore the ROI for social media is:

$$\frac{\text{Total customer conversion value-Cost of converting fans into customers*100}}{\text{Cost of converting fans into customers}}$$

Conclusion

Social media marketing is an interesting and new form of marketing. As any form of marketing, it necessitates planning, tracking and well thought out goals. Does it suit universities? Yes, it does, as most of their target market is using them. Can it be used exclusively? The short answer is no, it is just another tool in the university's bag of marketing tricks. Is it free? No, definitely

not, it actually requires quite a significant amount of time, cooperation, overview and coordination in order to be a truly efficient marketing method, and sometimes could use the help of paid software and hardware. Does it truly impact the "bottom line" of a university, its number of students? This is very hard to quantify, with the most probable answer being "yes, it has a role in increased enrolment levels", yet its biggest contribution is to brand awareness, brand equity and student satisfaction/loyalty (which can also carry over to alumni donations). All universities should add social media to their marketing arsenal, but they must choose their platforms wisely in order to be truly present and garner a significant amount of brand engagement, which leads to student satisfaction and loyalty.

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