



McGill

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The Use of Social Media for Alumni Relations and University Development

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Table of Contents

About the Author.....	2
Introduction	3
Part 1: Background and Terminology.....	5
Part 2: MyBarackObama.com.....	11
Part 3: The Use of Social Media in Universities	14
Video and Podcasts: University of California Berkeley	14
Blogging: The University of British Columbia	15
Finding, Sharing, Navigating: Stanford University	17
CAAE Member Social Media Survey Results	18
The Use of Social Media at McGill University.....	24
Acknowledgements	27



About the Author

Leisha LeCouvie is the Director, Parent and Affinity Programs at McGill University in Montreal, Quebec. Prior to McGill Leisha worked first at Trent University and then Concordia University and has extensive experience in all areas of alumni relations.

Leisha's current portfolio encompasses alumni board relations, affinity (including alumni educational travel), student programs, parent programs, special events and most recently social media.



Introduction

My interest in social media began with the confusion I felt around the subject. The term social media had been bandied about for months and I had used it myself without fully understanding what I was talking about. Then came the US presidential election and the fundraising/social community powerhouse that was mybarackobama.com. Although everyone was speaking about Barack Obama's use of social media in his presidential campaign, there was still a great deal of misunderstanding about the topic. Lastly, my interest in social media was further piqued while reviewing the CASE online social community alumni relations survey. A large number of respondents to that survey stated that they "have no real strategy for [social media]." I found it rather surprising that in a climate of accountability, associations would forge ahead in any area without strategy or metrics.

Given the speed in which social media tools change, evolve, appear and disappear, this research project could potentially never end. In order to maintain some semblance of order therefore, I have decided to break this presentation down into three distinct parts:

1. **Background and terminology:** Social media technologies did not come out of nowhere. Discussion forums for instance, by anyone's definition a social media, have existed since the earliest days of the Web. What has changed, though, is a significant shift in the nature of the Web from being a platform filled with information to be consumed to becoming a platform for social interaction and the creation of user-generated content. In this section I will review some of the terms that make up the social media lexicon and look at some statistics on just who exactly is availing themselves to these tools.
2. **mybarackobama.com:** my research project would not be complete without some exploration of this social media phenomenon. The importance of President Obama's online presence cannot be underscored. As Andrew Rasiej, founder of the Personal Democracy Forum stated in a CASE Currents article: "Any organization – political or not – that is not modeling itself by what Obama taught us in the last year and a half will go the way of the dinosaurs."
3. **The use of social media in universities:** In April I left the cold of Montreal behind and stationed myself in the San Francisco Bay area for a few days. I visited Berkeley one day and Stanford the next. I then flew to Vancouver and interviewed people at UBC. While we all seem to be at similar stages of planning and



implementing social media, each university is doing something significant, interesting, and unique. I will share their ideas with you.

Also in part three, I'll present the findings of a survey I conducted of CAAE member institutions regarding their use of social media. Lastly, I'll end this report by sharing with you some exciting plans we have at McGill. The research this fellowship has allowed me to do has helped us at McGill develop a comprehensive plan for social media that is strategic and measurable.



Part 1: Background and Terminology

The history of the World Wide Web is often described as having occurred in two phases; commonly referred to as Web 1.0 and Web 2.0. In the early days of the Web, Web 1.0, the Web consisted of pages of information directed at you, the reader. The Web was essentially a catalogue of information created by companies and organizations.

Originally coined by Darcy DiNucci in 1999 but widely attributed to technology guru Tim O'Reilly, the term Web 2.0 is used to describe significant changes that were taking place. Tools and technologies were appearing that were enabling non technical people to create and publish information to the Web. Technologies were also appearing that were enabling the creation of social bonds and human interaction. The Web was becoming a social media filled with commentary and dialogue.

Definitions

Social Media: Information and content created by people using highly accessible and scalable publishing technologies. At its most basic, it is a shift in how people discover, read and share news, information and content.¹ The key to social media, however, is that it comprises a dialogue between publisher and the reader. Post a video and someone will comment on it. Post a twitter Tweet and someone will tweet back. Poke a friend in Facebook and they'll poke back. Social media creates dialogue, connections, and relationships.

Social networking: A social structure made up of individuals or organizations tied together with some type of interdependency (values, visions, friendships).² The purpose of social networking is to connect to friends, business colleagues, and people with similar interests to share information and activities. Today's most popular social networks consist of Facebook and LinkedIn. These sites are designed to forge social and business connections regardless of where the network members are located.

Social networking as we currently know it, burst onto the scene in 2003 with Friendster – a social network to meet people, discover new events, bands, and hobbies. Friendster fell into disreard and was quickly replaced by MySpace; which younger audiences viewed as a more

¹ Wikipedia contributors, "Social media," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Social_media&oldid=300047923

² Wikipedia contributors, "Social networking," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Social_networking&oldid=243897745



Some of the most popular social media tools presently in use include:

Twitter: It's nearly impossible to avoid talk of Twitter, the current social media darling. Twitter is a simple micro blogging tool that allows people to post short, 140 character bits of information to the Web. Although some people use Twitter to share what's on their mind, where they are, or what they're doing, Twitter is increasingly being used in a number of important ways including news gathering and communication, marketing, recruiting, and more.

Blogs: Although Technorati.com reported last year that 95 per cent of blogs have been abandoned, blogs remain immensely important social media tools. Blogs allow anyone to publish information to the Web. As importantly, blogs allow readers to comment on the information posted, creating a social interaction and fostering collective intelligence.

Flickr: Owned by Yahoo, Flickr is the largest photo repository on the Web. As film cameras have been replaced with digital cameras, Flickr and other sites such as Google's Picassa have become the warehouses of the world's images. Keeping with the spirit of social media, these sites allow viewers to comment on photos and connect with the photographers.

YouTube: Whereas Flickr is the repository of the world's photographs, Google's YouTube is the world's largest repository of user-generated videos. As with other social technologies, people viewing videos can bookmark favourites, comment, and message other members.

LinkedIn: LinkedIn is the Facebook of the business world. It is designed to be a network of your business contacts and relationships. As with Facebook, LinkedIn is presently experiencing significant membership growth.

RSS: No discussion of social media would be possible without mentioning RSS, or really simple syndication. RSS is the technology that brings Web content to users. Rather than forcing individuals to visit many different sites to gather information or connect with other, RSS brings the information to the individual. RSS is a technology that is embedded in nearly all social media, greatly strengthening the connections between those publishing content and those consuming the content.

Use of Social Media

Before I go any further in this presentation I should state that I am personally late to social networking. I have never truly embraced the Facebook phenomenon. One look at my page – actually you can't look at my page because I made myself private – and you would see that I



have 3 friends. Two of them are immediate family. I could have had 4, but my 15 year-old daughter refused my friend request. I find much of the information posted to Facebook to be banal and self-absorbed. I have been known to throw fits when reading status reports of friends and neighbours: “Susan is wishing it were sunny outside” is not a piece of information I find even remotely useful or pertinent.

What I do find interesting about Facebook and other social networking sites is how quickly the population has adapted to these constant, up-to-the-minute updates on what other people are doing. In a September 2008 NYT article *Brave New World of Digital Intimacy* Clive Thompson talks about this omnipresent knowledge – that is both intriguing and addictive. According to Mr. Thompson, social scientists call this type of incessant online contact “ambient awareness.” Micro-blogging tools such as Twitter and tracking devices for the iPhone take this awareness to a whole new level.

For those of us over 30 this may seem like a nightmare – a barrage of nonsensical information, but according to Marc Davis, a chief scientist at Yahoo and former professor of information at University of California at Berkeley, “it’s an aggregate phenomenon.” And one that is extremely hard to understand until you’ve experienced it.

Merely looking at a stranger’s Twitter or Facebook feed isn’t interesting, because it seems like blather. Follow it for a day, though, and it begins to feel like a short story; follow it for a month and it’s a novel.³

What I also have a hard time getting my brain around is the number of friendships that are formed through social networking. I have 3 and my daughter has 250. I feel fairly confident in saying that she doesn’t know that many people. At 250 she is probably on the low end of the friendship scale – some people have thousands of online contacts that they follow through Twitter or Facebook. We worry that email is dead. Well, the way most of us currently use it, it kind of is. Status updates are thought to be less “cognitively demanding than an email message.”

But what kind of friendships are these? I know my 3 friends quite well - I live with 2 of them. According to anthropologist Robin Dunbar, we do have a “hard-wired upper limit”⁴ on the number of people we can know at one time. Generally speaking our Dunbar number is 150 and

³ Thompson, Clive. 2008. *Brave New World of Digital Intimacy*.
http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/07/magazine/07awarenesst.html?_r=1&scp=1&sq=clive%20thompson&st=cse

⁴ Ibid



even with ambient awareness and the number of updates received daily (hourly even), the number of true intimates we have does not change. Deep relationships are still predicated on face time which in fact supports the continuation of many of traditional alumni events. While I do believe we need to update many of our modes of communication, I also believe that getting a graduate physically back on campus is still key to our engagement and fundraising activities.

Adoption Rates of Social Media

Social media and networking is NOT a passing fad, it has been embraced across the generations:

- Over 35 per cent of American adults have a profile on a social network site – over 45.3 million active US users
- Facebook has more than 200 million active users, more than 100 million users log on at least once each day, more than two-thirds of Facebook users are outside of college, the fastest growing demographic is those 35 years old and older
- In terms of engagement, the average Facebook user has 120 friends on the site, more than 5 billion minutes are spent on Facebook each day (worldwide), more than 30 million users update their statuses at least once each day, more than 8 million users become fans of Pages each day
- LinkedIn has over 42 million members in over 200 countries and territories around the world. A new member joins LinkedIn approximately every second
- 70,000,000: number of total user-generated videos on YouTube (March 2008)
- 112,486,327: number of views the most viewed video on YouTube has (January, 2009)
- 412.3 years: the length in time it would take to view all content on YouTube
- 133,000,000: number of blogs indexed by Technorati since 2002
- 900,000: average number of blog posts in a 24 hour period
- 77 per cent: percentage of active Internet users who read blogs
- 2,455,595,000 and counting (as of July 3 at 11:57 a.m.) tweets to date

Why does all this matter to Alumni Relations? If you have a legitimate online community, then why should social media matter to you? Because it's not the features that can be found on



Facebook or LinkedIn or MySpace, it's not the tools that drive people to a site, it is the people. As Andy Shaindlin, Executive Director, Caltech Alumni Association at California Institute of Technology writes on his alumni futures website:

Discussions about online "solutions" for alumni associations now focus on the social networking features of sites like Facebook. Many (including some software vendors) say that it is these features that draw users away from online communities hosted by alumni offices. What is actually drawing users away is not the features of the software, but the scale, diversity, and the breadth of the network itself – that is, the people.⁵

Danah Boyd, a researcher at Microsoft Research New England and a Fellow at Harvard Law School's Berkman Center for Internet and Society voices a similar opinion:

. . . the single most important factor in determining whether or not a person will adopt one of these sites is whether or not it is the place where their friends hangout.⁶

⁵ Shaindlin, Andrew. 2008. Alumni Futures. <http://www.alumnifutures.com/2008/10/why-walled-gard.html>

⁶ Boyd, Danah. 2009. "Social Media is Here to Stay . . . Now What?" *Microsoft Research Tech Fest*, Redmond, Washington, February 26



Part 2: MyBarackObama.com

You may well have a great walled garden online community with terrific features, but if your graduates are meeting each other on an external community then you should be creating a strategy and presence to meet them there as well.

The Obama team did just that and combined a brilliant member-only online community with external social media links. The statistics tell the story:

- \$150 million raised in a single month
- More than \$500 million in donations in 21 months from 3 million donors
- 6 million donations of \$100 or less in 21 months
- An email database of 10 million supporters
- Nearly a million friends on Facebook
- 14 million views of a music video based on a campaign speech⁷

Key to the success of this “ultimate online political machine” is the definition of social media itself: the creation and sharing of content, news and information using accessible publishing technologies that create a dialogue. MyBarackObama.com made participation in the campaign easy and by linking to 16 different social networks (including Facebook, LinkedIn, MySpace, Twitter and Flickr) supporters could connect, comment, and participate through established groups in their community or interest group, and through videos, tweets and photos.

Perhaps the biggest coup in the Obama strategy was the decision to announce the vice-presidential pick by text message. In doing so the campaign collected tens of millions of cell phone numbers. This proved to be a brilliant tactic to collect data on those 18 – 30 year olds who don’t have landlines. With this information the campaign was able to be in direct and constant contact with supporters, offering them first hand information, mobilizing them in key states to contact undecided voters and empowering them to act as fundraisers. Donald Green, political science professor at Yale University: “Imagine if a university could turn its alumni into a massive roving team of fundraisers.”⁸

⁷ CASE Currents (February 2009) p. 21

⁸ CASE Currents (February 2009) p. 22



The Atlantic published an article about a year ago titled *The Amazing Money Machine* that looked at just how Obama was able to amass the fortune he did so quickly. They talk about how his fundraising machine attracted large and small donors, people who gave money and people who wanted to fundraise, long time democratic activists and first-time participants. And in particular it attracted those who were well-wired: computer, cell phone, PDA.

Obama's campaign is admired by insiders of both parties for its functional beauty – not just admired but gawked at, like some futuristic concept car leaking rocket vapor at an auto show. Obama's campaign has made a similar leap in how it has applied technology to the practices of raising money and organizing and it is already the clear model for everyone else.

An article last year on Politico stated that relationship building was the Obama campaign's best kept fundraising secret. Relationships on two levels: between the campaign and the individual; and between individuals. Social networking by any other name.

I hear a lot about the Obama campaign and how I should be modeling what we do in alumni relations at McGill after their success. Mostly I hear this from people who readily admit they don't know what they are talking about, but know we should be mimicking them somehow. Their instincts are not wrong, we should be looking to that campaign for inspiration. There are a lot of lessons to be learned from the technology and media geniuses who ran the campaign. I think Andy Shaindlin said it perfectly in a Chronicle of Higher Education article when discussing the impact of the campaign:

(it) increased the general public's comfort level with the kinds of tools that are going to benefit higher ed when it comes to engagement and giving online. They did us a favour because instead of trying to explain to people what a lot of these tools are, now we can actually talk about how to use them.⁹

I recently spoke with Rich Mintz, VP Strategy for Blue State Digital, the technology and strategy team behind Barack Obama's online fundraising and community engagement program. I asked Rich how I could make my Principal happy and model my programming after the Obama success. Rich told me that the campaign tenets easily translate to alumni engagement and fundraising. The campaign

⁹ Parry, Marc. "Colleges Weigh 'Yes We Can' Approach to Fundraising." April 24, 2009. Chronicle of Higher Education. <http://chronicle.com/weekly/v55/i33/33a00103.html>



- Created a strong emotional bond and enthusiasm with its supporters
- Respected the power of small donors
- Built a narrative over time
- Wrote personalized and relevant emails (and sent over 2 billion of them)
- Made it easy for people to affiliate with the campaign – made them feel part of something: Together they were an army.

Rich stressed that for us to succeed the authenticity of our associations needs to be translated into all our media: emails, website, internal and external communities. Our messages need to be relevant and we need to develop strong supporters by channeling alumni energy into action. Associations need to have a strong proprietary online presence as a foundation to market the university and core programs, but also need to have well branded links in external social media for alumni to meet and communicate on their own.



Part 3: The Use of Social Media in Universities

All three of the universities I visited this past spring are using social media fairly strategically and have links off of their websites to key social networks such as Facebook and LinkedIn. Instead of spending time reviewing all of their engagement strategies, I have decided to focus on one key example of excellence from each institution; a best practice from each university.

Video and Podcasts: University of California Berkeley

In his Intermedia blog, Charlie Melichar, Vice President of PR and Communications at Colgate University recently wrote about the Long Tail Theory and Pareto Principle and how they relate to alumni engagement.

The Pareto Principle is the 80/20 rule and in alumni relations we have traditionally used it in the following way: 80% of our programming is for 20% of our graduates. Social media is changing this and with multi-media tools such as Youtube and Flickr, engagement of the other 80% of our alumni population is growing. In fact, instead of being stymied or stalled by factors such as age or distance, a long tail approach – focusing efforts on larger widespread audiences instead of niche markets – is now widely available.

Charlie is quick to point out that reshaping our offerings and over-catering to the unknown masses is not the way to go, but with new technologies I think we can look at enhancing some of our current offerings with social media to engage a larger slice of the pie.

Social media, if you remember, is partially defined as the ability to share information. For alumni associations this is a significant opportunity– we love to share. Sharing and disseminating information, good news and interesting reports keep us engaged with our constituents. Lectures and readings that were once only accessible to those living around our campuses are now widely accessible using a variety of online tools such as podcasts, Youtube and iTunesU. And the University of California Berkeley is a star in this realm.

Berkeley began audio and video taping lectures and poetry readings before most of us even thought about the idea and today the library that resides on @Cal is extensive. Visitors have the chance to watch and/or listen to poets and Nobel Laureates – and, budget permitting, most alumni lecture events are recorded. The Youtube stats for Berkeley are impressive: boasting four unique channels including Events, Courses, Campus Life and Athletics with over 34,000



subscribers and total channel views of 2.5 million. More than 1.2 million people have accessed the main Berkeley channel and viewed the campus recruitment video UC Berkeley.

One of the most interesting aspects of social media is how different areas of an institution intersect through these tools. So while the Berkeley channels are under the purview of Educational Technology Services, alumni play a significant role in this area as viewers and participants. One of the most watched videos on the athletics channel is Cal Athletics in Beijing with more than 80,000 views. During this series, Jigar Mehta, a UC Berkeley alum interviews student athletes (and their families) participating in the summer Olympic games. Not overly slick or produced, but interesting and sincere, these videos instill a great deal of pride in the university through the narrative. There are no pictures of the campus and no outward selling of the institution (other than a final “go bears”), yet I imagine every one of those 80,000 viewers (most of whom are presumably students, parents or alumni) watched these videos with pride.

The purely educational aspect of video and the sharing of knowledge cannot be overlooked and I think that the Berkeley @Cal library of accessible audio and video lectures is commendable. While iTunesU is a tremendous asset in any university’s communications tool kit, the fact that a library of information is so readily available off of the main alumni website is of significant interest. Alumni can remain connected to the university through their original academic connection, leading to a great sense of commitment and nostalgia.

One of the basic beliefs of alumni relations and fundraising is building on nostalgia and video does this in spades. Video is immediate and keeps alumni connected to what is going on campus. Both institutional and user generated videos strengthen alumni engagement by bringing an additional sensory experience to viewers. Video helps to cement brand and bring the viewer back to campus regardless of where they live.

Blogging: The University of British Columbia

Prior to advent of Web 2.0, Webmasters were the only way to have information posted to a site. These Webmasters were, in essence, the gatekeepers of the internet. Social media has changed all that and has opened the gates. Gatekeepers were removed and the masses were empowered to publish and comment.

Blogs provide commentary or news on a particular subject; others function as more personal online diaries. And blogging can be a powerful tool to engage the alumni community:



- Rather than simply used to publish information, blogs allow alumni and others to comment, creating a conversation between publisher and reader
- Search engines index information posted to blogs on a daily basis, making it easy for alumni to find the latest information about an institution as soon as it's posted.
- Images, audio, and video clips can be posted to a blog, creating a more engaging and entertaining experience than text only information.

The University of British Columbia in Vancouver, BC relies heavily on external social media to virtually engage their alumni and blogging is one of their success stories. Beginning more than two years ago these blogs have been written and regularly published by four students from differing backgrounds. Bloggers are paid for a minimum number of posts per month. Marlisse, the most current blogger, writes of her experience in law school and as with the other students, her posts are concise and well written. Some of the bloggers embed photos and links to external blogs. The blogs are advertised and pushed out through monthly e-newsletters and the hope is that the recently launched UBC Alumni Association Facebook fan page will help to drive readers (and their comments) to the blogs.

Complimenting this group of student bloggers is the university's own Blog Squad made up of 18 first year, second year and graduate students, writing in four main categories: Sustainability, Careers/Work, Spirituality and Involvement/Leadership. While the quality of the posts seem to be of equal value, the Blog Squad is available through RSS feed – allowing other students, alumni and parents the opportunity to subscribe to these blogs and receive them as they are published. Of particular note on both the association and university sites – there is relatively little commenting being made, which is interesting considering that the posts are written in a way that invites interaction.

I recently read a blog about blogs, in which the author discusses the top reasons why an organization should be using this medium to communicate with its constituents. Of particular interest to alumni associations are the first two incentives: (1) Sharing the small stuff. Universities and alumni associations are a treasure trove of stories and anecdotes. Sharing student experiences at UBC connects alumni with current students and strengthens engagement with the institution. (2) Taking members behind the scenes. This is especially important for organizations such as alumni associations with so many constituents living outside the institution's walls.



Blogging lets you take them there by giving you a platform to share stories and photos over time, creating an ongoing narrative, post by post, all in one easily accessible place.¹⁰

Linking to external social media and providing platforms for user posts and comments can be cause for concern and loss of senior management sleep. Universities have traditionally been very careful of their communications, controlling what is said and when. Social media is changing this and managers are beginning to understand that they are no longer in control of their brand or what is published about the institution. Blogs in particular can be tricky, especially when giving students free reign of content. According to Barney Ellis-Perry, Director of Alumni Relations at the University of British Columbia, this can cause some anxious moments, but allowing students their own voice was a primary factor in going ahead with the blogs. UBC has the right idea and equally as important, the institutional intestinal fortitude to pioneer these blogs.

Finding, Sharing, Navigating: Stanford University

Stanford University has a great attitude when it comes to social media and their constituents: let them use what works best for them. Adam Miller:

We see one big alumni community across the web, including on our site, on sites like Facebook, and importantly, on the bridges between the two. We want to make it easy for alums to connect with other alums, and to Stanford, all across the web. Could be YouTube, Facebook, and our community all in the same hour!

Stanford's holistic view of the web encourages an autonomous relationship between the graduate and the tools. "We want the community to be owned (and largely) policed by the alums." Stanford strongly believes in the value of a solid proprietary online community for graduates who enjoy a Stanford exclusive environment, while at the same time providing opportunities to connect with graduates in the communities where they are already active.

Linking the walled garden to external media is getting easier for alumni associations. One application Stanford is planning to use is Facebook Connect, a relatively new function that connects member identity and content from institutional websites directly to Facebook. There are important features of Connect: single sign-on and news feed propagation. Accounts are

¹⁰ <http://www.nonprofitmarketingguide.com/blog/2009/07/08/nonprofit-blogs-5-reasons-you-dont-need-one/>



connected between institutional online communities and Facebook and members can sign into both accounts from either their community or Facebook.

Once connected, information such as event attendance can be published to their Facebook News Feed. The event and hosting site are hyperlinks from Facebook back to the alumni community. Class Notes are supported for feed propagation as well. Facebook Connect is vital to university data collection efforts.

When asked about a formal strategic plan for incorporating social media into Stanford alumni programming, Adam Miller spoke about the likelihood of a hub and spoke model and pointed me to a recent blog by Jeremiah Owyang of Forrester Research.

The Hub and Spoke (Cross Functional): Like the hub on a bicycle wheel, a cross-functional group that represents multiple stakeholders across the company assembles in the middle of the organization. The hub facilitates resource sharing and cross-functional communications (via the “spokes” in the wheel) to those at the edge of the organization (or the “tire”)

A hub and spoke model at Stanford would rely on key central resources – still to be defined – at the hub and spokes radiating out to various departments such as the magazine, travel, reunions, etc. A key component of this type of a hub and spoke model is cross promotion (across all media, traditional and social) and communication. Like Berkeley, the intersection of university departments will be critical to the success of their plans.

Stanford is in the midst of a significant redesign and overhaul of their current online community and registration system, with an expected launch date of early 2010. They are already far ahead of many of us in terms of outlook, plans, interdepartmental collaboration and cross promotion. By using traditional media (reunion newsletters) to invite graduates to social networking sites (reunion Facebook groups) they are increasing touch points and engaging alumni on multiple levels. New community features such as enhanced groups, custom privacy settings and smart recommendations of content, groups and people based on an alum's profile, connections and site activity will only serve to increase engagement levels.

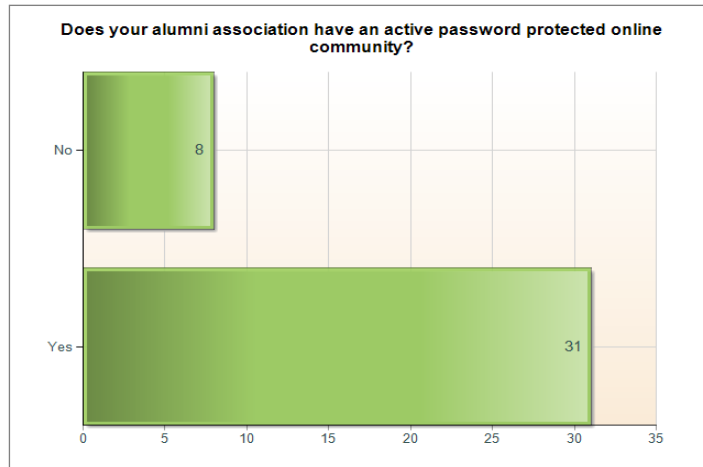
CAAE Member Social Media Survey Results

The information I received through the social media survey that I posted in late May proved to be very interesting and gave me a good general overview of what our colleagues are doing vis-a-vis online communities, social media and communicating with graduates.



Most of us, it seems, have an active password protected online community.

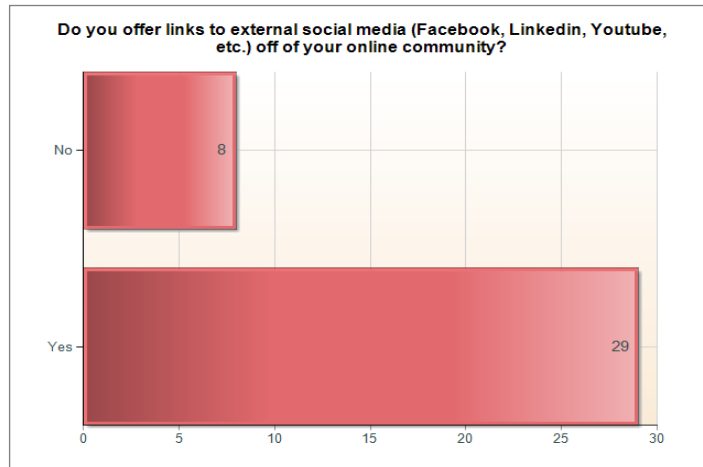
Social Media Survey: Does your alumni association have an active password protected online community?





And most of us link to external media from our Web sites.

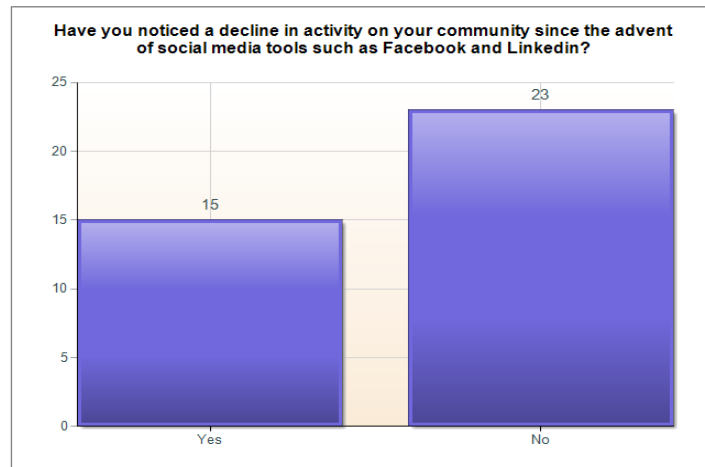
Social Media Survey: Do you offer links to external social media (Facebook, LinkedIn, Youtube, etc.) off of your online community?





Most of us have not seen a decline in activity on our own websites since the proliferation of Facebook and LinkedIn.

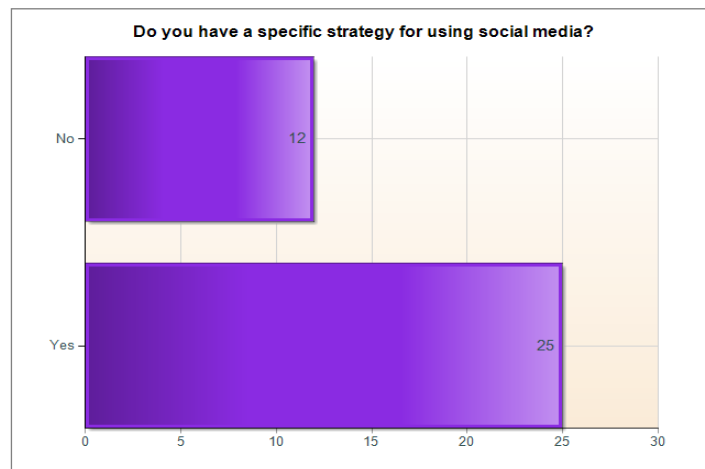
Social Media Survey: Have you noticed a decline in activity on your community since the advent of social media tools s ...





Interestingly enough, and contrary to the CASE survey from earlier this year, most of us DO have a specific strategy for tackling social media.

Social Media Survey: Do you have a specific strategy for using social media?



And while all of this is interesting, the most interesting parts of the survey were the comments.

Question: What keeps your alumni interested in maintaining a profile on your online community?

- “A connection to Facebook”
- “Not much! Can’t compete with mainstream social networking sites and don’t aim to”
- “Career services – networking, mentor programs”
- “The ability to have a secure site to share personal information.”
- “Primarily used by those who are not on external social networking sites – who want the security and privacy of a walled garden”
- “Class notes”
- “A more intimate networking opportunity”
- Several responded: “discontinuing online community in favour of external sites”



Question: How do you believe virtual engagement through media such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Youtube, Flickr, etc. helps your association?

- “Our goal is to reach alumni where they “live” and it’s on these social media outlets”
- “Great way to engage alumni. People of all ages now participate online. Very cost effective for us.”
- “Unclear. Certainly younger alumni use these tools. Our approach is to use all of the tools our alumni are using to provide as much information through multiple channels.”
- “It gives us one more avenue to touch people, especially young alums. However, it is not the panacea that development officers are trumpeting it as. We still receive much more valuable, engaging and meaningful contact through our website, emails and direct mails”
- “It’s the wave of the future and the absolute best way to reach the younger crowd! It’s an absolutely necessary tool”
- “. . . While social media is but one component of our comprehensive marketing effort, we’ve seen tremendous increase with online engagement, and enjoy the passion our alumni share with us and with each other”

The Use of Social Media at McGill University

Up until a few months ago Alumni Relations at McGill University used social media in many areas of our programming, but without strategy or metrics or a clear understanding of what could be done. Most of our Facebook and LinkedIn pages were created by graduates who were tired of the institutional reluctance to dive into untested waters. We were left floundering, not understanding the depth and breadth or the significance of the tools available to us. We decided to tackle the situation through education, review, research and most importantly, through the hiring of an external online marketing company to advise and guide us through the process.

With the help of bv02, McGill Alumni Relations recently launched www.alumnilive365.mcgill.ca a dynamic social media infrastructure – an aggregate – that allows for effective and measurable engagement of alumni. Alumnilive 365 uses RSS feeds to compile McGill related content from internal and external sources and allows for sharing across various social media. The aggregate links to McGill accounts and pages in well known networks such as LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Flickr. It pulls in content from YouTube and Flickr and sends out information to Facebook and LinkedIn.

Key to the aggregate is the ability to share and comment on stories and blogs. The calendar of events can be subscribed to and sent directly into personal agendas. Graduates can subscribe to all news or only that pertinent to their geographic region.

The Google Analytics account helps us keep track of our social media progress by measuring site statistics including the number of visits, page views, average time on site, bounce rate, referring websites and more.

While an overarching departmental social media strategy is currently in the works, our goal with the launch of this new tool is to incorporate social media into most areas of alumni programming. Staff is being asked to devote 5% of their time to promoting their events and programs through the aggregate and other social networks. The tools are not the complicating factor, the recalibrating of staffing and the creation of content are proving to be the most challenging. As Jeremiah Owyang of Forrester Research said in his recent blog post:

The faster brands can realize that approaching social marketing and collaboration isn't about technology, but about process and change management the better off they are.



Conclusion

Charlie Melichar recently summed up my presentation for me. In a phone conversation a few weeks ago Charlie said:

It is the content that is important, not the container. What we have on campus is content, what we need to do is find the appropriate container to disseminate the content. The container can be an institutional website or external social media tools. What is important is making it easy for our constituents to access this information.

One of the respondents to my survey question about engagement and external media stated “. . . it is not the panacea that development officers are trumpeting it as” and I think this cautionary comment is well placed. We need to be careful as we explore new media and make sure we don’t rely too heavily on one tool. That being said, used well, social media is a boon to effective, strategic and measurable alumni engagement.

As both Rich Mintz and Charlie Melichar told me in separate interviews, key to a successful social media strategy is a strong institutional website. We shouldn’t compete with external sites such as Facebook or LinkedIn by creating redundancy, but allow easy access to them from our own sites. By marrying a robust proprietary site with a variety of external media and a communications strategy that allows for cross messaging we are offering our alumni a suite of programming that has never been available to them in the past.

Compelling and current content, cross promotion and community participation are all basic tenets of a strong social media strategy. While nothing will replace the value of face to face contact or getting a grad back on campus, we now find ourselves in the enviable position of being able to engage that other 80% through a host of social media platforms.

And as a last word, from Michael Stoner, President of mStoner and Liz Allen, Associate Director of Alumni Relations at Caltech Alumni Association, and their recent pre-conference presentation at the CASE 2009 Summit, six thoughts about social media:

1. Social media/social networking can’t exist in a vacuum. It is connected to all your communications and engagement activities. We should now all be extending our already well-developed brands across the web.
2. Social media is not an option but a necessity in 2009.
3. Social media isn’t “free.” You need to be prepared to participate; the biggest challenge is staffing (and I would add content)



4. Social media isn't fast: it's about relationships and building relationships takes time.
5. Social media isn't hard, but it can be complicated.
6. We all need to participate in order understand what social media/social networking is all about.



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