





Independent schools break the mold when it comes to social media **By MICHAEL STONER**

# Recipes for Success

**I**N 1999, Proctor Academy in New Hampshire became a pioneer. It was one of the first institutions of any size to embrace a less formal, more conversational approach to institutional communications—one that would later be called “blogging.” It began when Chuck Will, who had served as director of admissions before moving to the development office, posted brief observations and photos about life at Proctor several times a week. “Chuck’s Corner” officially became a blog when it began accepting comments about six years ago and moved to the school’s home page.

Today, independent schools are still leading the social media movement and are showing

educational institutions of all sizes how to make social media an integral part of an institutional communications strategy.

## OVERCOMING OBJECTIONS

To be clear, most communicators are not giving up print or other traditional media. But they recognize that social media has quickly become an important channel for the audiences they want to reach. Social media adds texture and complexity to the marketing mix.

“More and more, marketing seems to be about being where your constituents are and addressing them in the fashion they are comfortable using,” says Joel Price, webmaster at Friends’ Central School in Pennsylvania. “It’s

COOKING POT PHOTOGRAPH BY ANDREY FILIPSKIY/ISTOCKPHOTO.  
PHOTOILLUSTRATION BY DAVID HERBICK FOR CASE

such a shift from five years ago. What matters now is how you interact and how flexible you are.”

In this new world, constituents visit social media sites expecting to engage in conversation with you and each other—by commenting on blog postings or Flickr images, for example. Top-down, one-to-many communications no longer work.

“The most important and difficult concept for school administrators to grasp is that social media tools have put the shaping of reputation into the hands of audiences,” says Carol Cheney, president of the communications and marketing firm Cheney & Company. “Since you can’t control what people say about you, you need to focus on being what you want to be, delivering what you promise, and communicating clearly about your distinctive attributes to create a positive buzz.”

All this is not necessarily threatening, it’s just different. Will observes that releasing control of institutional messages is sometimes hard for school leaders. “They’re concerned about inappropriate responses to blog posts or intemperate Facebook comments, photos, or videos.”

But instead, he argues, comments that administrators perceive as negative are actually *beneficial*, because they reinforce the school’s authenticity. “It is rare that I have to delete a comment,” he says. “It’s best to let a feisty dialogue go on as much as possible—we’re demonstrating honesty and transparency.”

Likewise, the blurry photos and blurred videos that alumni or students upload to Flickr or YouTube

augment professionally shot photos or video, providing a different view of Proctor’s campus reality. “We’re getting away from writing about such things as programs, achievements, honesty, excellence and [instead], through these media, providing a direct experience of them,” Will says.

### SIZE MATTERS

To take advantage of social media, it pays to be nimble. Independent schools’ communicators generally work in a relatively small community with a flat hierarchy, and they don’t need to ask permission or develop an elaborate communications plan to try the latest social media tool.

For example, Barbara Kennedy, associate vice president for external affairs at Baylor School in Tennessee, explains that she didn’t need any prior approvals and just “made Baylor’s social media happen.” Jan Devereux, director of communications at Beaver Country Day School in Massachusetts, says, “We are lucky that our administration has been very supportive of our experimenting in the social media arena without a drawn-out trial-and-approval process.”


It also doesn’t hurt that many of the important social media tools are free and fairly easy to use. They reward experimentation, and the cost of failure is low.

Baylor School’s first effort at social media involved a travel blog about a student trip to Washington, D.C., paired with a photo gallery on Flickr. It didn’t have

## in short

**FACULTY AS FRIENDS.** One of the social media issues that many smaller institutions are facing is whether faculty members should “friend” students on Facebook. For faculty who do want to connect with students on e-mail and social networking sites, an article from the Center for Research on Learning and Training at the University of Michigan outlines some best practices. “How Does Your Online Identity Impact Classroom Climate?” suggests that faculty include an e-mail and social networking policy on the class syllabus and restrict photo sharing when students are friends. To read more from the article, visit [www.crlt.umich.edu/gsis/P4\\_3\\_5.php](http://www.crlt.umich.edu/gsis/P4_3_5.php).

**THE ULTIMATE FAN.** Not only is Massachusetts’ Beaver Country Day School using social media to attract different constituents, it recently tapped Facebook to attract best-selling author Mary Karr. Students from Sarah Akhtar’s English class named themselves after Karr’s book *The Liars’ Club* and wanted to invite the author to speak. To get Karr’s attention, they created a video about the top 10 reasons she should visit Beaver and posted it to her Facebook fan page. The social media experiment paid off, and Karr visited the school in November 2009 to discuss her work. To see the video, visit [www.youtube.com/watch?v=dXYDjbdCf6w](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dXYDjbdCf6w).



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a broad reach, says Kennedy, but it was still valuable. “It gave me a reality check on the time commitment,” she says. “Then we started tweeting. And I used my personal experience with Facebook to guide me in developing the school fan page, which we launched when classes began in August.”

#### DO THE MASH

Smart school communicators realize that it’s no longer enough to have a Facebook page, a LinkedIn group, or a Flickr gallery; the new challenge is to connect these disparate networks. That realization has led to the popularity of mashup sites, which provide links to Twitter feeds, Facebook pages, and other resources on one Web site. The mashup brings the voices of many constituents into a space that was formerly the province of a few school staff members.

The Beaver Country Day School’s mashup page ([www.bcdsmashup.org](http://www.bcdsmashup.org)) mixes social media with student work. The heavily wired BCDS boasts an instructional technology initiative and a 1:1 laptop program. As a result, students are immersed in different sorts of social media in the classroom. Given this focus, extending the school’s communications through social media made perfect sense, says Devereux. “We use Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn to continue and strengthen connections with alumni

and to enhance the school’s brand reputation with prospective families as a progressive school on the leading edge of technology,” she explains.

BCDS’s Facebook fan page ([www.facebook.com/bcdschool](http://www.facebook.com/bcdschool)) contains photos, videos, and news items and is designed to keep in touch with constituents and to promote school events. In addition, the school maintains a private Facebook group for alumni to reconnect. BCDS also has two Twitter accounts—one updated several times a week with news and school information and another for networking with fellow educators and sharing information about the school with other marketers.

Massachusetts’ Northfield Mount Hermon School also manages a mashup, actively developing new content and importing feeds from various social networks into a microsite that is linked to its home page ([www.nmhschool.org](http://www.nmhschool.org)).

NMH views its social media presence as very different from its Web site and manages these external channels closely, ensuring little redundancy among them. Heather Sullivan, director of marketing and communications at NMH, says, “A little bit of overlap is acceptable for really important events, but we want to give the public a reason to participate with NMH on every channel. To do this, the information has to be a little different on every platform.”

**NEW KIDS ON THE BLOCK.** Feeling like Twitter is tired? If you are on the hunt for the next hot social media tool, you might want to check out the top 100 tools for learning from the Centre for Learning & Performance Technologies ([www.c4lpt.co.uk/recommended/index.html](http://www.c4lpt.co.uk/recommended/index.html)). Compiled by hundreds of professionals in the education field worldwide, the list ranks social media sites and applications that schools can use to advance their mission. Although favorites like Twitter, Delicious, and YouTube take the top three spots, respectively, visitors can find out more about less popular tools such as VoiceThread, animoto, and Wordle.

**STUDENT SAYS.** As mentioned in the article above, Chuck Will writes online for New Hampshire’s Proctor Academy, and his blog has become a highly visited part of the Web site. However, Will not only infuses his own opinion into the social media landscape of Proctor, but adds student voices as well. His blog features articles and briefs written by seniors, who focus on everything from favorite faculty members to fun tidbits about the school. One senior even gave advice about how to write the perfect college application essay. To read more from students or Will himself, visit [www.proctoracademy.org/chucks\\_corner](http://www.proctoracademy.org/chucks_corner).

Content from these platforms is then imported back into the microsite ([www.nmhbook.org](http://www.nmhbook.org)) on the newly launched NMH Web site. This microsite integrates feeds from Facebook, Flickr, the school's news and events, Twitter, and a developing set of WordPress blogs that cover the Middle East, musings from the library staff, classroom discussions, and more. The site links the school's home page and NMH's social media presence in a nearly seamless fashion, allowing site visitors to move in and out of the social web.

### CREATING AN ONLINE COMMONS

At Baylor, BCDS, and NMH, staff and communicators are deeply involved in managing the institutional Web sites and the schools' social media activities. But what about students?

At Worcester Academy in Massachusetts, a new model is emerging, one that brings many more voices to the fore. A significant number of students are participating in an online commons where they post their writings, photos, and videos.

About a year ago, Antonio Viva, associate head of school, asked the 18 juniors and seniors in his creative writing class to write about the best way to communicate what they wanted to say. "They came up with the idea of a class blog where the students could post their work as text, images, and videos," he says. "Within a few weeks of the first trimester, we launched [the Web site] WA Mash."

The teens write about topics that are important to them, and Viva says he's been surprised by their opinions on controversial topics, such as same-sex marriage. "I've had parents say they are amazed that their student is so funny and articulate," he says.

WA Mash ([www.wamash.com](http://www.wamash.com)) became very popular, gaining more than 2,000 visits a month. Students liked the fact that their writing was being read—and commented on—by people from campus and all over the world. It's changed the way students write.

"Before I write a WA Mash article, I tend to think of things that have been bothering me or things that I found interesting, but take a different spin on [it]," says Andrew Pogorzelski, a Worcester student and

WA Mash contributor. "I try to write something new and original that you cannot find anywhere else. I feel like I have a valid opinion and a pulse rather than regurgitating facts my English teacher told me."

Now the site incorporates tweets tagged with #WAMash, YouTube videos, and MashPics imported from Flickr and Facebook. The scope of WA Mash has expanded to include more students and administrators. Soon, more than 60 people will contribute.


The next step, Viva says, is to figure out how WA Mash will fit into the bigger picture of the school's communications. "WA Mash is not just a blog, but more of 'place' for schoolwide communications," he explains. "So where does the communications director post stories? Does the school newspaper have a separate site? We want to figure out how this piece fits into our other channels. We're expecting to take some interesting steps in the next six to eight months."

### WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

Social media usage leads to questions about posting policies, online privacy, and management. Viva says that Worcester is creating a posting policy for WA Mash, including recommending that everyone tag tweets with the #WAMash hashtag so they will show up in the academy's search. But he wants to be sure that the academy is modeling appropriate online behavior for students: "We have an opportunity to teach young people how to relate to each other online," he says.

Managing the time staff members spend on social media can also be a concern. Baylor's Kennedy finds that she can manage a Twitter feed, a blog, and the school's Facebook presence and not feel overburdened. But BCDS's Devereux notes that her school's social media activities "could be a full-time job."

Involving colleagues that aren't part of the communications team as contributors to and managers of social media seems to work well at Northfield Mount Hermon. The school uses at least 20 contributors as well as students among its social media voices. Sullivan and her staff manage the [www.nmhschool.org](http://www.nmhschool.org) site; several other NMH staff also actively update NMH's social media presence. For example, the Web manager



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and another communications staffer curate a Flickr gallery, working with a faculty member who does a lot of events-related photography. Sullivan and an admissions counselor partner to maintain and monitor NMH's Facebook presence and tweets.

One of Kennedy's long-term goals at Baylor is "to get more voices involved in the conversation and, in doing so, contribute to the effort." Viva reports that, like NMH, the communications staff at Worcester Academy is working on time-management solutions by engaging people across the institution in its social media and communications activities.

Broader staff involvement creates the need for better internal communication, however. When one or two people tweet and update Facebook, they are effectively managing an institution's message. "As I look for campus events to tweet or post to Facebook, I'm always thinking about what we want people to know about us," Devereux says. "For example, today we had four students recognized as national merit scholars, so we posted it." Involving more people in social media means building awareness among them about themes that the school might want to emphasize in its communications.

## DOES SOCIAL MEDIA MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

There's plenty of anecdotal proof that involvement in social media pays off. Many schools report that audiences respond positively to social media—Proctor's Will says that parents are so effusive about "Chuck's Corner" that it's sometimes embarrassing to him. And when asked how effective their social media activity is, schools can point to metrics, such as number of Facebook friends and Twitter followers.

Hard proof is more elusive.


Most school leaders cannot yet answer the question, How exactly does social media impact fundraising or recruitment? But social media does provide significant insights into a school's audience and thereby helps staff communicate more effectively.

For example, Kennedy uses the data pulled from Facebook profiles for her communications strategy. "We believe that we are building the foundation for connecting with a younger audience we may have missed otherwise while engaging older constituents," she says. "Our total fan base is predominantly ages 13–24, almost evenly male/female. It is also of great value to see that 1,002 of our Facebook fans are from outside of the state, and 39 of them [are] from 19 different countries."

These data helped Kennedy convince her board that social media is not just a fad, but an important component of Baylor's marketing communications.

For Proctor, social media provides a significant additional communication channel. "We know who has the money and propensity," Will says. "Social media enables us to spontaneously demonstrate the power of their gift to the lives of students." He also uses data pulled from Facebook to demonstrate the platform's value to Proctor. He estimates that 30 percent of the school's alumni and lead donors are on Facebook, representing \$508,000 or 52 percent of the annual fund, as well as 62 percent of the alumni donor prospects. Will also knows that 50 percent of Proctor's leadership donor parents use Twitter.

In just a few short years, social media has reshaped how schools communicate with important constituencies—and current and new tools are likely to have a greater impact in the years to come.

Yet it's still early. Travis Warren, president of WhippleHill Communications in New Hampshire, thinks that schools should avoid seeking the "next big idea" in social media. "I want our clients to embrace the concept, not the tools," he says. "Do a lot of small experiments, build mashups, and watch what's successful. If you do a lot of small things and some of them fail, you're still OK." 

Michael Stoner is president of mStoner, a consulting firm with offices in Chicago and Vermont.

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