

The Advantages of Social Media for College Presidents

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Once, social media were considered newfangled. Today, we urge you to use these platforms for doing business. It is a cost-effective way to expand your visibility to targeted audiences while promoting your institutional brand. What's not to "like"?

Social media platforms provide the opportunity to expand, reach and engage with a wide variety of audiences on unlimited topics. Those who do not employ social media are missing out on ways of communicating efficiently and quickly to stakeholders.

For years we have advised college and university presidents on a wide variety of operational issues. In this issue, we make recommendations on developing a social media strategy for presidents, the chief spokesperson and primary communicator for any institution.

When Scott was appointed president of Bethany College in 2007, we created and tested a long-term social media strategy. The strategy focused on reinforcing the brand of a nationally ranked liberal arts college in a rural section of West Virginia, and further engaging an already loyal base of alumni and friends. The results during his eight years as president were astonishing, with minimal cost and maximum benefits.

In 2015, he was appointed president of Virginia Wesleyan University-another nationally ranked liberal arts institution, in the thriving metropolitan area of Hampton Roads in Coastal Virginia. Here, he established multiple platforms of social media that he utilizes as president. This is in addition to visibility through regular e-cards, e-blasts, opinion pieces, monthly presidential e-letters, a weekly online newsletter and monthly online commentaries for The Virginian-Pilot and other news outlets.

As an active university president who is closely identified with the university's brand, Scott controls eight different platforms from his multiple devices, including desktop, iPhone and iPad. All content reinforces the branding message of Virginia Wesleyan University. These include Flickr, LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and a daily blog about campus life which feeds into the university's website. He has 32,959 LinkedIn connections, 1,756 followers and 2,079 page likes on his business Facebook page. He has tweeted more than 58,400 times garnering 2,470 followers and counting. On his newest platform, Instagram, he has 759 followers.

In January of 2015, Scott was one of 22 presidents of colleges and universities in the United States and Canada profiled in "#FollowTheLeader: Lessons in Social Media Success from #HigherEd CEOs." In February 2015 he was named in a national study (by Roland H. King of PhairAdvantage Communications) as one of the "Top 14 Presidents Publishing Op-eds" in 2014. He ranked third in the survey behind Dr. Michael Roth of Wesleyan University.

He and other higher education administrators utilize social media in many ways. Some use multiple platforms, while others focus on one. Some give students a behind-the-scenes look at the life of a university president. Presidents celebrate, advocate, recognize campus achievements, or simply interact-responding to questions, comments and concerns. Most, however, implement a balance of multiple approaches.

Different audiences gravitate toward different platforms and content. For instance, current students and young alumni utilize Twitter and Instagram more than Facebook, while donors and parents are geared toward other platforms.

Here are a few highlights on creating and maintaining an effective social media presence:

Social media quickly and effectively allow you to send multiple, tailored messages to diverse audiences. The varying functions of each platform allow you to expand your audience.

Social media permit you to control the frequency and distribution of your messages; keeping content fresh is a must.

You can engage with a variety of constituents with tools that gauge the interests and concerns of your audience.

Through analytics provided by the platform, you can see how many users view and interact with your post. Electronic distribution services at nominal cost allow you to time-deliver messages to balance distribution. These might include campus news, reports and relevant articles from outside organizations that reinforce your institution's message and image.

Finally, in times of crisis, social media platforms are essential in distributing timely alerts, messages, and updates. This not only gets important information out quickly, but also reinforces that the administration is focusing on communications 24/7.

The impact of a social media strategy far outweighs the time needed to create and implement it. And it's clearly here to stay.

About the Authors

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