

# **The Use of Social Media in Higher Education for Marketing and Communications: *A Guide for Professionals in Higher Education***

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## **ABOUT THIS GUIDE**

Colleges and universities are beginning to embrace social media and realizing the potential power and implications for using it as a component of their overall marketing mix. This guide will introduce you to some of the more popular forms of social media, including Facebook, MySpace, YouTube, Flickr, Twitter, blogs, and del.icio.us.

148 colleges and universities responded to a survey in July 2008 answering what social media they are using most, how they are using it to reach their target audiences, and which department(s) at the college are responsible for maintaining it. This guide will review existing literature available in this subject area, identify implications for and against using social media, and discuss best practices, recommendations and considerations for higher education marketers.

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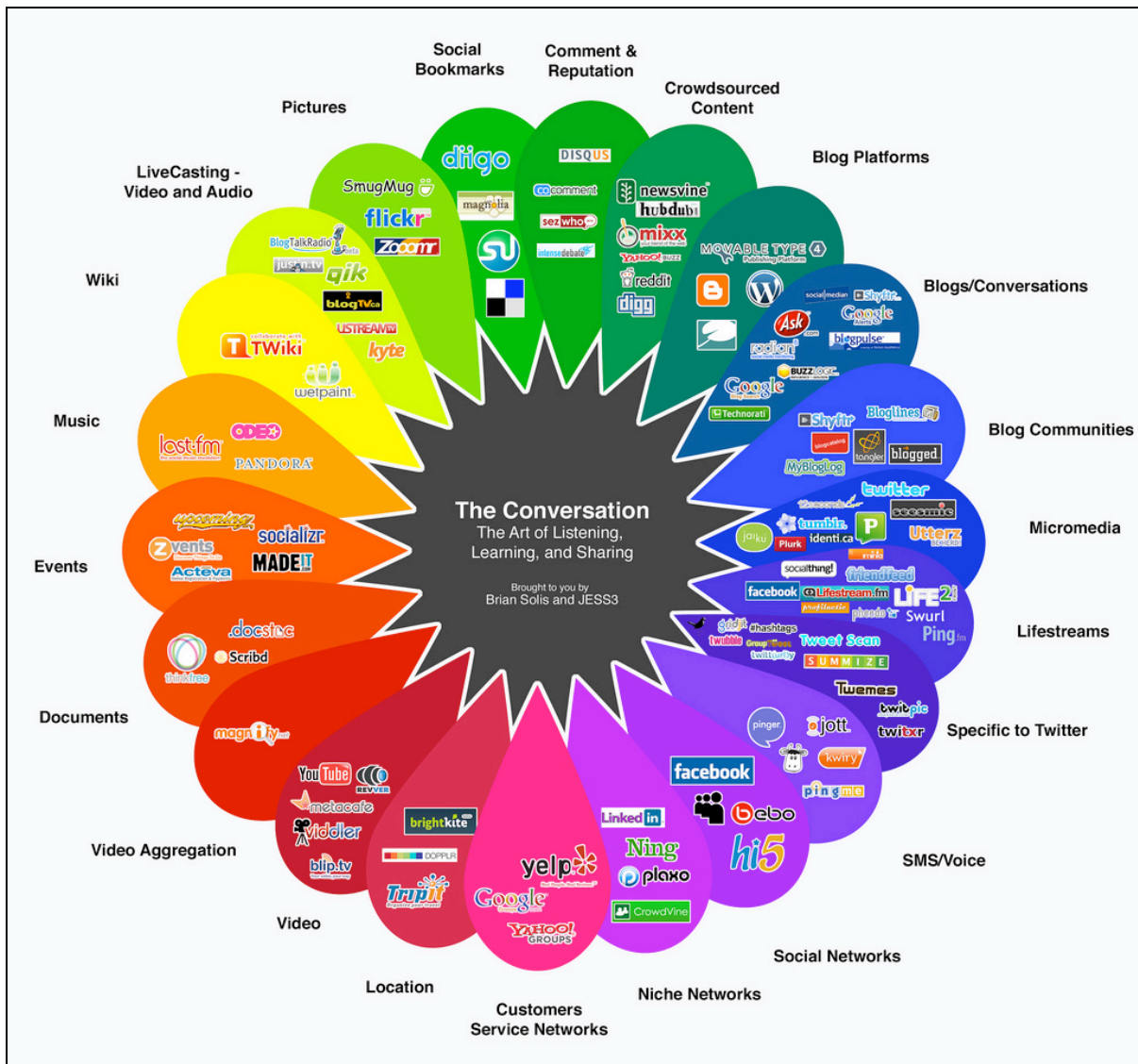
## **AN INTRODUCTION TO SOCIAL MEDIA AND ITS COMMON USES IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

Social media comprises of activities that involve socializing and networking online through words, pictures and videos. Social media is redefining how we relate to each other as humans and how we as humans relate to the organizations that serve us. It is about dialog – two way discussions bringing people together to discover and share information (Solis 2008).

In the three and a half minute video called “Social Media in Plain English,” the authors provide an easy-to-follow introduction to social media with a small town ice cream shop metaphor. “Social media means new opportunities to create and communicate with people that care” (LeFever 2008). It talks about the change in business and media environment from a high level, rather than the specifics of how to use one or more tools.

Fred Cavazza, a French consultant in new media, breaks down the various forms of social media into ten categories in his “Social Media Landscape”: publication tools, sharing tools, discussion tools, social networks, micropublication tools, social aggregation tools, livecast, virtual worlds, social gaming and massively multiplayer online gaming (MMO) (Cavazza 2008). Brian Solis, co-founder of the Social Media Club and leader in Social media thought, recently introduced “The

Conversation Prism,” which he describes as “the art of listening, learning and sharing” (Solis 2008). The graphical prism (below) illustrates the wide array of social media tools available today.



Jason Falls, co-founder of the Social Media Club, asked his Twitter followers to explain social media in two words or less. Common terms included “relationship building,” “interaction,” and “community” (Falls 2008).

Social networking is one aspect of social media, where individuals are in communities that share ideas, interests, or are looking to meet people with similar ideas and interests. Currently, the two most popular social networking communities are Facebook and MySpace. This guide will focus on the possible uses of Facebook, MySpace, YouTube, Flickr, blogs, Twitter, and del.icio.us for marketing in higher education.

According to the Pew Center study of online social networks among American teens, 55% of all teenagers who are online use social networks like MySpace or Facebook, with 64% of 15-17 year-olds creating online profiles in these networks (Noel-Levitz 2007).

**Facebook** is a social utility that connects people with friends and others who work, study and live around them. People use Facebook to keep up with friends, upload an unlimited number of photos, share links and videos, and learn more about the people they meet.

Facebook was originally launched in 2004 for Harvard students, and then was expanded to other Ivy League universities. It then expanded to any university student, then high school students, and now anyone over age 13 can join.

Facebook is made up of six primary components: personal profiles, status updates, networks (geographic regions, schools, companies), groups, applications and fan pages. When Facebook launched the fan pages concept in November 2007, many universities jumped at the opportunity to create an official Facebook presence for their university. As of January 2008 there were 420 universities taking advantage of this new feature (Cheater 2008). Fan pages are similar to personal profiles, but can be used by businesses. They include wall posts, discussion boards, photos, videos, and many other applications. People who view the page can choose to become “fans” of your organization, and this shows on their personal profile page, for their friends to see. This creates a viral marketing effect – when one of their friends sees they’ve become a fan of another organization that interests them, they’re likely to become a fan themselves. Facebook pages also offer organizations the ability to communicate with fans through direct and targeted messages (such as fans in a specific network or age group), and view “insights,” which includes detailed statistics on the usage of the organization’s page.

**MySpace** is an online community that lets you meet your friends' friends, share photos, journals and interests.

Because of the way Facebook was started, it has developed an “elite” image, and is more attractive to colleges and universities to adopt, over MySpace. The numbers also support the attractiveness – 85% of students at 4-year universities have Facebook profiles and Facebook user demographics in areas like higher education and discretionary income are typically higher than those of MySpace (Qualman 2007). In a recent survey, Facebook was named by both men and women ages 18-24 as the most popular Web site they access on a daily basis (eMarketer.com 2008). In April 2008 Facebook surpassed MySpace as the world’s most popular social network (Stevens 2008). This can lead to unprofessional, amateur looking pages, which can hurt a company’s image if not done well. Other organizations with poor looking pages influence one’s overall perception of MySpace, which contributes to its “not-so-elite” image.

A panel of higher education professionals shared their concerns about Facebook's policies on privacy and security (Read and Young 2006). However, in early 2008 Facebook revamped and tightened their privacy/security policies and have given individual users far greater control in determining what their friends and general users can see of their profiles, if anything at all (Facebook 2007).

Unlike Facebook, MySpace allows users to fully customize their profiles by complete changing the appearance, background and format of their pages (Solis 2008).

**YouTube** is the leader in online video, and the premier destination to watch and share original videos worldwide through the Web. It allows people to easily upload and share video clips across the Internet through Web sites, mobile devices, blogs, and e-mail.

Universities have been making videos for 20+ years to aid in recruitment efforts. YouTube has given them a platform to easily distribute these videos to a much wider audience, and without the costs of burning to CDs/DVDs and postage to mail to a narrow audience. Dove spent two and a half million dollars on a 30-second ad in the 2006 Super Bowl. Later, they distributed their famous "Evolution" video exclusively on YouTube, which caused a surge of traffic to their Web site, at absolutely no cost (Li and Bernoff 2008). Buzz developed and their brand thrived, without breaking their budget.

**Flickr** is an online photo site where users upload photos that can be organized in sets and collections. Public photos may be viewed and commented on by others (Consortium 2007).

Universities have found Flickr to be a great tool to easily share photos with students, alumni, faculty and staff. The automation of uploading the photos, adding captions and tags, and turning them into organized collections with slideshows without any manual Web coding, is a great timesaver for time-strapped Web professionals.

**Blogs** are a form of online journal. They can have a single author, or several. Most blogs allow readers to post comments in response to an article or post (Consortium 2007).

The most popular use of blogs for marketing in higher education is having currently enrolled students blog about their lives on campus, as a recruiting initiative in conjunction with admissions. One-quarter of all college admissions offices use blogs by students or campus personnel (Noel-Levitz 2007). Karen Sines Rudolph wrote a thesis on the topic of using official admission blogs to recruit millenials, from a public relations perspective. In this research she found it

was key that the bloggers selected best represented a full spectrum of interests and status (freshmen, transfers, etc.), and that they have a clear understanding of the purpose of recruitment through their blog posts. She also found it important that the institution's brand practitioners stay involved with the project, actively guiding bloggers so their posts can meet established goals, namely to provide prospective students with the clearest picture of life at the institution (Rudolph 2007).

Blogs are also being used by some colleges to post news articles to open conversations about them. Faculty to blog about their teaching, travel and research. Admissions counselors blog about their travel and recruitment cycle.

### **Twitter**

Twitter is a cross between instant messaging and blogging that allows users to send short (140-character) updates. Users can also follow the updates of friends they "follow," send them direct messages, reply publicly to friends, or just post questions or comments as their current status (Consortium 2007). Anyone skeptical of Twitter and its utility should read the comprehensive list of fifteen reasons you should use Twitter (Puiu 2008). They include reasons such as awareness and branding, promoting your content, fast feedback, finding new audiences, and marketing – all areas marketers in higher education should have great interest in.

We haven't found a definitive way to use Twitter for marketing in higher education yet. Some have suggested it can be used in conjunction with other social media tools, such as student bloggers also having Twitter accounts they update more often than their blogs, to serve as another tool to promote their new blog entries. Others have suggested it can be used in emergency situations, such as the shootings that happened at Virginia Tech (Swartzfager 2007), or using it in place of a live chat service for recruitment (Wilburn 2008).

**del.icio.us**, now also available at [delicious.com](http://delicious.com), is one of many social bookmarking Web sites. The primary use of [del.icio.us](http://del.icio.us) is to store bookmarks online, which allows users to access the same bookmarks from any computer and add bookmarks from anywhere, too. Tags are used to organize and remember bookmarks, as compared to folders built in to Web browsers bookmark tool. You can also use [del.icio.us](http://del.icio.us) to see links that your friends and other people bookmark, and share links with them in return. You can browse and search [del.icio.us](http://del.icio.us) to discover bookmarks that everyone else has saved.

One of the most beneficial ways some schools have found in using this tool is to bookmark news articles about their university throughout the Web to share with their audiences.

There are far more social media sites and applications than mentioned in this guide and covered in this survey. eduStyle, a Web design gallery dedicated to Web sites in higher education has an extensive list of colleges and universities with various social sites (Foss 2008).

## **SURVEY RESULTS**

In July 2008 higher education Web, marketing and communication professionals subscribed to the uweb, HighEdWeb and SUNY CUADnet listservs were asked to complete a survey about their university's use of social media (Reuben 2008). We received 175 responses from four different countries: United States (94.3%), Australia (1.7%), Canada (2.9%), and New Zealand (1.1%).

Some schools had multiple people respond. Once these duplicates were removed, there were 148 unique schools responding to the survey. Of those 148, just over half (53.79%) of the college's/university's reported having an official **Facebook Page** for their campus, and 20 of them have developed a custom application for Facebook. Only 21.9% report having an official presence on **MySpace**, and only one responder indicating they created a custom application for MySpace. Nearly 67% do not have an official **Twitter** account for their campus, and about 64% do not have an official **Flickr** account. Just over half have an official presence on **YouTube** and nearly 60% have some form of blogs on their site. Only 17% reported using **del.icio.us**.

For every form of social media questioned in the survey, respondents reported the overwhelming majority of these tools are maintained by one or more individuals in their marketing/communications/public relations office. 48.11% maintain their Facebook page, compared to undergraduate admissions (13.21%) and/or their alumni or Web development office (11.32% respectively). Most report using it as a tool for communicating with current students, to reach out to alumni, and for recruitment. Most spend 1-4 hours a week keeping their Facebook Page updated.

College's/university's that have an official MySpace page report 60% of their marketing/communications/public relations office maintains it with mixed reasons – the highest reported being recruitment (33.33%). The majority also reports spending 1-4 hours/week maintaining it.

Of the 42 responders reporting to have an official Twitter account for their college, 50% of them say it is updated by their marketing/communications/public relations office. 50% use it to communicate with current students, and the other half use it to reach out to alumni. The majority update their status 1-4 times/week.

As with previous examples, those that reported having an official Flickr account, nearly 43% say their marketing/communications/public relations office maintains their presence. Their use of Flickr were split pretty evenly between sharing photos with current students, faculty, staff and alumni, and the majority report spending 1-4 hours a week adding photos to Flickr.

YouTube seems to be used primarily for recruitment purposes (29.50%), with some using it to share videos with current students and alumni. Most report spending 1-4 hours a week adding videos to their channel.

Historically, blogs have been most popularly used for recruitment purposes. However, the survey respondents were split fairly evenly amongst their use of blogs on their university's Web site. They comprise of students (31.28%, likely for recruitment), staff (23.08%), faculty (20%), news (20%), and other (5.64%, including alumni and departmental).

## **CONCERNS**

There are a number of concerns professionals in higher education grapple with when considering using, or even embracing social media.

### Concern #1: Loss of control

Blogs are highly customizable and can be used for many purposes beyond personal blog entries. In higher education they're used by admissions to enlist currently enrolled students to blog about their lives to attract future students to their college. Faculty blog about various research projects and courses they are teaching, which attracts currently enrolled students to their courses or area of research, and prospective students to the college. Even some college presidents blog, despite the perceived risky nature of such venture (Johnson 2007).

A perfect example of the loss of control relates to blogs and their "comments" feature. Having a blog to begin with in higher education can be controversial, and opening up the comments feature to allow two-way dialog can be frightening. This feature can easily be turned off, but then that begs the question – why even use the blog format to begin with? "Negativity will not go away simply because you opt out of participating. Negative commentary, at the very least, is truly an opportunity to change the perception that you did or didn't know existed (Solis 2008)."

"The Internet is not some sandbox that can be walled off anymore – it is fully integrated into all elements of business and society" (Li and Bernoff 2008).

If your university has a Facebook page, a MySpace page, or uses any of these other tools, there are forums for comments that have the chance of collecting

negative remarks or feedback. However, most are finding these features to be resourceful, positive tools that help more than they hurt. They can assist in clearing up misconceptions and promote unsolicited, genuine positive feedback, which is invaluable to prospective students and marketers alike. Online social network users are three times more likely to trust their peers' opinions over advertising when making decisions (JuniperResearch 2007).

Don't be afraid to have a Facebook/MySpace presence because you worry about negative publicity this gives people a forum to communicate in. For the 1% of people that may be negative, think of it as an opportunity to change perceptions, to begin a conversation. While we may not be able to control the message, or completely control perception, we can help steer it if we're a part of the conversation.

#### Concern #2: Time commitment

Workload creep is something many professionals in higher education deal with. Many play multiple roles and struggle to stay afloat. Adding social media into the mix can become time intensive. There needs to be a strategic reason and plan in place to use social media. Unfortunately it is unlikely to take the place of something existing, as it likely will be used to complement other forms of marketing or tools already in place.

Don't just add a Facebook Page for your university because your competitors have a page. If you're not going to be able to add regular content to it and take advantage of the wall posts and have time to respond quickly, it's not worth it.

Add blogs to your site only if you're going to be able to keep it updated at least once a week and be able to moderate comments on a daily basis.

Expect to spend anywhere from 1-10 hours a week when using social media as part of the marketing mix, depending on how many tools you use, how actively they're used by your audiences, and how extensive your presence is in each. Be strategic when selecting your options – some are more conducive to your university's image and overall marketing strategies, and some based on the demographics of your target audiences.

#### Concern #3: Information overload

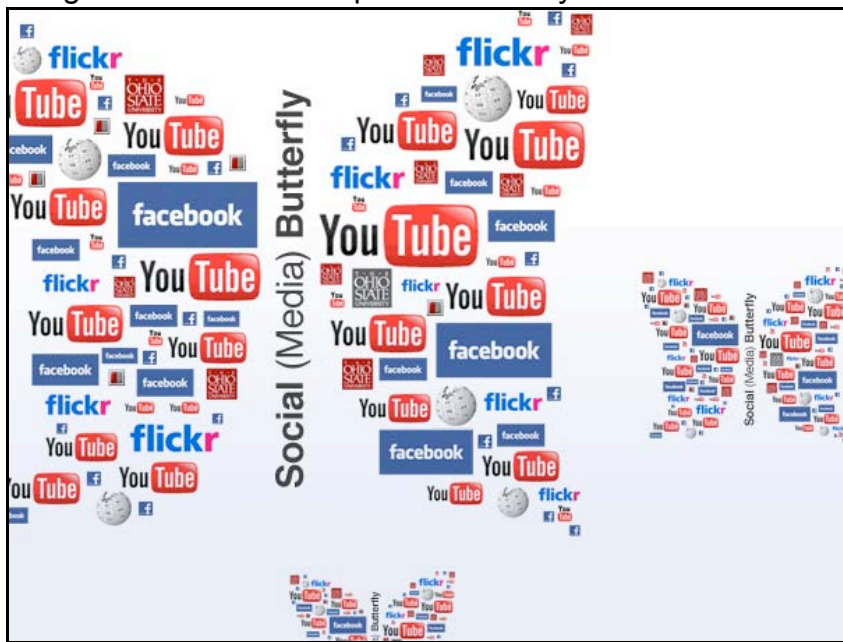
Years ago managers found themselves concerned about lack of productivity because of the amount of time their staff members spent instant messaging for personal use. Then, admission counselors and student staff began using it as part of their jobs to communicate with prospective students. The advent of social media has created so many forms of media, that those who follow blogs, Twitter friends, Facebook friends, MySpace friends, etc., can easily find themselves overloaded now when trying to keep up with "traditional media," such as e-mail, print publications, and instant messaging.

#### Concern #4: Anyone can create an “official” account for your university

Facebook, MySpace, Twitter and YouTube do not do any kind of background checks on individuals wanting to create an account with a college name. Do a search on each of these sites for your school’s name and see what comes up. If you do not already have an official account for your school, consider creating one to reserve the university’s name with those tools you may not be ready to use yet, such as Twitter. If you do not reserve your name, someone else will – whether it is an unassuming staff member with good intentions, or a rebel or disgruntled student.

### **BEST PRACTICES**

The Ohio State University (OSU) uses Facebook, YouTube, Flickr, delicious to as part of their social media strategy in seeking ways to develop interaction with their target audiences. OSU coined the term “Social (Media) Butterfly” and had one of their designers take the logos of the social media sites they use and design them into the shape of a butterfly.



Courtesy: <http://www.osu.edu/features/2008/socialmedia>

According to Kristen Convery, Web Editor in OSU’s University Relations office, they created their Facebook Page in November 2007 when Facebook launched this feature. Their Page, with 6,904 (as of 8/2/08), includes events, RSS feeds, videos, and MP3’s. They’ve chosen to “turn off” the wall feature, which most other college’s/university’s are taking advantage of. “It’s a resource issue,” says Convery, who is currently the sole Web Editor for the university, with an enrollment is over 50,000.

Before launching their YouTube channel, Convery talked to a staff member from The University of California, Berkeley, and Google (owners of YouTube), for assistance and best practices. They assisted with the setup of the channel and design of the page.

The University of California, Berkeley has one of the most well known channels and volume of subscribers on YouTube in higher education (The University of California 2006). They have had nearly 2 million views of their channel, and have created sub-channels for more specific content, including courses, events, campus life and athletics.

OSU has chosen not to use Twitter right now because they “haven’t found the right application for it yet,” and Facebook has more of their target audience and demographics than MySpace does. OSU is also using delicious and has a LinkedIn alumni group.

Business schools, like the Southern Illinois University College of Business, see sites such as Facebook as crucial tools for their communication and marketing strategies (Campbell 2008). Through their Facebook group, they provide members with school news, the ability to communicate with other students, faculty and alumni.

The University of New Mexico (UNM) has setup a “Flickr pool” where they encourage community members to create a Flickr account if they do not already have one, join the UNM Flickr group, and to share their photos of their campus. They request the photos be of their campus, events or student life. They currently have 335 images in their pool, all of which are moderated.

Ball State University has had student bloggers on their site for many years – 12 for the 2007-08 academic year. Butler University’s bloggers, now called “Butler Rockstars,” are entering their second year on <http://go.butler.edu>. Brad J. Ward, electronic communications coordinator for Butler, says their blogs and forums make up 30-40% of their traffic in one month. They had 10 bloggers in 2007-08 (11 if you count their mascot, Butler Blue), and plan to have 8 or 9 for 2008-09.

Of the 23 college/university MySpace sites listed on the eduStyle Social Site gallery, most do not have overly active sites, especially in terms of two-way dialog with friends as most Facebook Pages do. MySpace seems to be a much more casual atmosphere and none of the colleges seem to have a real strategic purpose with their pages, other than just trying to be where some of their target audiences are. Of the 23 sites reviewed, Auburn University has the most active presence with 11,067 friends (8/10/08). Their page is glittered with videos, photos, and nearly 2,500 comments. The most professional looking MySpace pages include Oklahoma City University, Wofford College, and Richland College.

## RECOMMENDATIONS & CONSIDERATIONS

The power of social media has just scratched the surface. Most believe its use in higher education is controversial, but what if we started thinking outside the box? Individuals use sites such as Digg.com to rate other Web sites, and product reviews on Amazon.com. What if we opened up courses for student reviews on our site? New students would be able to view reviews on classes when trying to make their selections, especially for general education courses. Courses with great reviews will likely receive higher enrollments, without any additional cost to market these classes. Administrators would likely worry about the classes that would receive poor reviews – but whether you enable this feature or not, these conversations are happening elsewhere, likely on sites you have no control over.

Social media offers advancement professionals a great opportunity for keeping in touch with alumni after they graduate. Facebook is one of the more popular tools they are now using to keep in touch with recent alumni. Alumni that are more in touch with their alma mater, and individuals there, are more apt to be future donors to the college. However, according to the E-Expectations Class of 2007 Report, 80% of the high school students surveyed said they have not looked for a school they were considering attending on MySpace or Facebook. And, only 27% report having read a blog written by a current student and 21% by a faculty member at a college they were considering, (Noel-Levitz 2007), before delving too far into social media without this base.

Noel-Levitz suggests that social networking can be a great resource for recruitment efforts, and could be very beneficial to your program. However, they still believe the majority of your focus should be strengthening the experience perspective students have on your official Web site (Noel-Levitz 2007).

Social media gives us the opportunity to humanize stories of students and alumni of our institutions, which can create loyalty and earn future business (students), and ultimately their respect (Solis 2008).

If you are willing to join the conversation and embrace social media in some form, create strong and effective policies for their use and assign staff members with specific monitoring and contribution tasks. Establish only those sites and tools your staff will really have the time to commit to. “Participation is no longer an option as Social Media isn’t a spectator sport” (Solis 2008).

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