

Social Media for Higher Education



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Introduction / The Need for Direction

Your students and prospective students are congregating on the social web, which means there's no better time to gain perspective into their discussions and find ways to enhance their academic experience.

To do so, though, you'll need a social media strategy to differentiate your organization from the thousands of colleges and universities around the world vying for student attention through blogs, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and other channels.

After reading this ebook, you'll have all the information you need to create or augment a social media plan for your college or university. We'll discuss:

- How to align resources and prepare for getting started in social media
- How to identify and understand your target audience(s)
- How to set social media objectives that coincide with your organization's goals
- How tapping into social media conversations can lead you to valuable insights and opportunities to engage
- Various ways to use social media to engage students, alumni, faculty and your community
- The basic metrics you'll need to measure success

We have a lot to talk about, so let's get started!

Chapter 1 / Prepare to Get Social

Becoming a social institution doesn't happen overnight but if you plan accordingly you will find that social media will touch all facets of your school. Social media can enhance your school's ability to recruit new students and retain the ones you have. It can increase communication with alumni, aid in event promotion and even take your curriculum to the cutting edge.

Here's how to get started down the path of becoming a social institution.

Build a Social Media Team

Your social media team should have six key roles - some focused on overseeing the strategy and management of your organization's social media presence, and others who think like publishers, and can produce great content to share on social media channels. We'll talk more about planning for content creation in Chapter 6.

1. The **Social Media Manager** owns the social media initiative. This person is responsible for executing the social media goals set by senior leadership. The social media manager controls the budget, hires the right people, and makes the tactical decisions whenever needed in the rapidly changing world of social media. The social media manager additionally oversees the Social Media Council discussed in the next section.
2. Your **Community Managers** will be the face and voice of your brand, out on the front lines of social networks like Twitter and Facebook. They'll be spreading your content, communicating with your community, reaching out to influencers, answering questions, and dealing with complaints. They'll also be the first responders in a crisis. Select people with good judgment, exceptional social skills, humor and initiative.
3. Behind the scenes should be one or more **Social Strategists**. They'll be the ones measuring and analyzing your social media efforts, tracking how you're doing against your objectives, and suggesting more effective ways to engage. They make sure you're not only participating in social media, but actively learning and growing from your experiences. Hire people with a head for numbers, reasoning skills, and business experience.
4. Someone has to be responsible for meeting content publishing deadlines set in the editorial calendar, implementing a style guide, and ensuring all content is of high quality. Meet the **Editor**.

5. **Content Creators** write blog posts, ad copy, Facebook status updates and ebooks. Others can shoot video, snap photos, or record your podcast. Not all Content Creators have to be part of your team, however. Students, alumni, faculty and other resources can contribute. Find passionate resources to help tell your school's story.
6. Your team additionally needs **Content Producers** to handle the design and technical side of producing content. They edit photos, video and other digital assets to ensure highest quality, and they can package it all according to individual channel specifications, like file size, dimensions or orientation.

You'll have to decide whether it makes more sense to train from within or hire from without. Jeff Cohen shares the benefits of each approach in his post, "[Build or Buy to Start a Social Media Team.](#)"

And don't be discouraged by the number of roles here; if need be people can wear multiple hats.

Set Up a Social Media Council

Every organization is different, but in many successful social organizations, the Social Media Manager oversees either a formal or informal Social Media Council – the group of people who share the following responsibilities:

- Creating and updating social media policies and guidelines for employees
- Providing clear direction on how employees should integrate their personal social media activities into their professional life
- Approving the creation of new social media channels (and preventing duplication of effort and unnecessary proliferation of pages and accounts)
- Ensuring consistent branding and messaging across all channels
- Identifying, testing and approving third-party tools, such as social media monitoring platforms and social media management tools
- Coordinating the adoption of social media tools with other systems, including
 - customer relationship management and marketing automation (often in conjunction with IT)
- Sharing social media best practices and success stories internally
- Working with Legal, HR and IT to integrate social media policies with existing company policies
- Creating core materials for social media presences and campaigns that can be modified and localized for reuse by other parts of the organization

Craft a Social Media Policy

If you don't have a social media policy, you're inviting disaster. You must set rules and guidelines so staff can be confident about engaging without doing lasting damage to your brand.

Chris Barger, former Director of Social Media for General Motors and author of [The Social Media Strategist](#), joined us [in a webinar](#) to explain the essential elements of a social media policy. These include:

- A statement that the organization's broader ethical guidelines also apply to social media
- Reminders of individual responsibility and liability
- Reminder that staff must post disclaimers that they do not speak for the organization
- Disclosure of affiliation with the organization when posting
- Respect for copyright and fair use laws
- Honoring the confidentiality of proprietary or internal information
- Prohibitions on hate speech, ethnic slurs, etc
- Privacy and discretion reminders

[Mike Petroff](#) collected some social media policies from various schools.

- [DePaul University](#)
- [Florida International University](#)
- [George Mason University](#)
- [Kansas State University](#)
- [Northwestern University – Feinberg School of Medicine](#)
- [Seattle University](#)
- [University of Texas – Austin](#)
- [Washington University in St. Louis](#)

Your in-house lawyer is your friend here. Bring her in to help draft the policy. Make sure everyone is aware and has bought into the policy before they begin posting.

Train the Staff

Anyone in your company from Admissions to Athletics to Alumni may be using social media to engage with your community. They need to be trained. Knowing how to invite Facebook friends to a birthday party or [how to post a bacon cupcake on Pinterest](#) doesn't mean you understand the nuances of social media in the world of higher education.

Introductory training will answer basic questions, such as:

- What is social media?
- Why does social media matter (to me personally, and to this school)?
- How do I use social media?
- What is our social media policy?
- How do I engage with our community?

More advanced training should cover topics such as:

- How different departments use social media
- The school's overall social media strategy
- What it means to be a social institution
- Dealing with a social media crisis
- Long-term relationship management
- Community management
- Internal collaboration using social networks

To learn more about making the case for social or getting prepared, you may want to explore [Social Media Blueprint: A Step-by-Step Plan to Prepare Your Company](#).

Make Social Media Part of the Curriculum

If you want to set yourself apart from the others, bring social media to those that are most familiar with it, your students. Forbes [lists social media proficiency](#) as one of five skills that will get you a job in the new economy. Even though [almost all college students have Facebook accounts \(95%\)](#), they likely won't know the business implications of this transformation.

At Clemson University, [students were given access](#) to a state-of-the-art social media command center. Using the [Radian6 social media listening command center](#), students were tasked with creating innovative research projects using data provided by the social media listening tool. One group of students created a method for using social media to predict stock prices.

For more information, read our free [Clemson University case study](#).

Chapter 2 / Choose Your Audience

Don't engage in social media without knowing whom you're trying to reach. The first step to identifying your target audience is uncovering the various demographics, lifestyles, interests, geographic locations and values of your audience segments.

The next step? Understanding them. Without knowing what keeps your audience up at night, your social media efforts will be unfocused and ineffective. Hopefully your marketing team already has information about your target audience(s). If not, you may have to do some research to craft the personas that represent the individuals you'll create content for. These will likely include several of the following:

- Potential students
- Accepted applicants
- Existing students
- Alumni
- Parents
- Faculty
- Donors
- Fans of the Sports Teams

Since each segment has very different needs, you'll have to take the time to understand how each group uses social media differently to properly serve them. Answering these questions about your audience will help uncover the answers you need to create compelling content and have meaningful conversations:

- How do they seek information?
- How do they use social media?
- Which social networks do they use?
- What life decisions are they struggling to make?

- What challenges or problems are they trying to solve?
- What are their “dealbreakers” – the factors big enough to repel them from enrolling or donating?
- What are they reading? Watching? Listening to?

Refer to Chapter 4 to learn how social listening can help you understand your target audience.

Chapter 3 / Define Objectives

Good hunting dogs are trained to ignore all scents but one: the game the hunter's pursuing. You need the same discipline, because social media is filled with many false trails. Set clear goals and objectives, and stick to them doggedly.

Tie your social media goals to your organization's goals. Collecting more Facebook likes or Twitter followers doesn't count. Instead, look at things like driving admissions, reducing costs, and improving student retention.

Make sure your manager and team buy into your social media goals. Having specific goals and objectives that everyone signs off on means you can appeal to them when someone wants you to veer off track.

Some possible objectives you might want to accomplish include:

- Increasing admissions
- Increasing student retention rate
- Raising awareness of athletic, research and community programs
- Increasing attendance at sporting events
- Raising money through gifts and endowments
- Fostering faculty culture, communication and learning
- Attracting talented faculty
- Gathering feedback to improve programs and curricula

Whatever your focus, you'll want to make goals and objectives SMART: specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and time-bound. They should look something like this:

Goal: To support our institution's overarching retention goal, we must attract new students, foster stronger student relationships, increase positive word of mouth, and increase online applications by June 30.

Objectives: To accomplish our goals by June 30, we must increase social media engagement by 30% and referral traffic from Facebook and Twitter by 20%. We'll do this by creating a comprehensive, student-oriented online resource library. We will create and publish three blog posts per week, publish one alumni story per month, host one webinar per month, produce one video per quarter and share all of the above through social media channels.

And then, of course, you'll want to identify the metrics you'll use to determine success. To learn more about how to measure your objectives, stay tuned for Chapter 7.

Chapter 4 / Social Media Listening

In the minute that's elapsed since you read the last few paragraphs of this ebook, people around the world have shared over **648,00 pieces of content on Facebook, and Tweeted over 100,000 messages.**

As you struggle to stay afloat in this flood of data, how do you find the Twitter discussion that might lead to three new grad students, the LinkedIn Group that inspires a whole new curriculum, or the blog post that could permanently damage your school's brand?

The answer is social media listening. Effective social media listening involves filtering all those conversations using relevant keywords and keyphrases to find the posts and conversations that matter to your school.

Sweeping the entire social web is no easy task, so make sure you carefully research which tool will help you find the conversations that matter. ([Here's a short guide to picking a social media listening platform.](#))

Social media listening can help you:

Gauge the Health of Your School's Brand

The first thing every school wants to know about social media is what people are saying about them. Gauging the health of your brand online provides operational intelligence that you might not glean from other sources.

Do people love you? Are they frustrated by your admissions process? Is your new drama program a hit? And does the feedback line up with how you're positioning and presenting your school to the public? (Maybe you need to change your messaging to suit prospective students.)

Don't shy away from criticism. Negative feedback can be some of the best intelligence you can gather about what you can improve in your business. Instead of taking offense, think of your critics as volunteer mystery shoppers.

Understand Your Audience

Going beyond just monitoring, social listening tools can also provide a deep-dive look at the commenter's age, gender and location.

Now you've got a finger on the pulse of your institution, giving you the ability to tailor your marketing messages for specific geographic regions and age range. You'll never again be left wondering who

your messages are touching or who's talking about their interactions with your school – if they're saying it, you'll be there.

Flag Student Retention Issues

Only 48.5% of students at public universities ever complete their degrees, leaving a lot of room for improvement.

Use social media listening to flag and classify student retention issues. ACT's policy report, [The Role of Academic and Non-Academic Factors in Improving College Retention](#), suggests directing students into retention programs that address their particular issues.

For example, to help build academic self-confidence and motivation, students may receive academic counseling and advising. To increase levels of social support and involvement, they may be encouraged to participate in social support groups, such as campus big brothers or big sisters and student organizations.

Retention issues uncovered by social media should also be tracked on an aggregate basis, providing valuable intelligence to your institution on which areas need to improve.

Handle Your Next Crisis

Being a good social media listener will help you immensely in a crisis, allowing you to respond quickly to the right people with the right information in the right way. A good social media listening program can preserve — and even improve — your school's reputation in a crisis.

Listen before the crisis to build a backup reservoir of trust, identify channels for crisis outreach, find key influencers who might damage your brand or amplify your response, and flag small issues before they explode into big ones.

Listen during the crisis. What kind of volume and sentiment are you dealing with? Which people and which sites are critical of your brand? Knowing about the 5,000 angry posts on your Facebook Page will help you respond quickly and sensitively. Monitoring social media will help you see the crisis from your community's perspective, shaping your language and adjusting your priorities.

Listen after the crisis. You need to be aware of unresolved issues and lingering frustrations that need to be fixed. Don't just passively listen: ask. Monitor social media for sentiment around your school, comparing levels before, during and after the crisis. Is positive sentiment on the rise again? If not, why not?

Find Potential Applicants

Most sales pitches on social media are annoying and intrusive. But there is a time when outreach is more than welcome. That's at the point of need, the moment when someone expresses a desire that your school can fill.

Listening at the point of need can help you discover opportunities to help by offering information or expertise — without enrollment pressure — at the perfect time.

Think about the wording potential students might use in looking for the educational experience your school can provide: phrases like “I’m looking for,” “I need,” and “I’m trying to find.” Experiment with the keyphrases you are listening for to find these inquiries.

Collect a list of keyword terms and phrases that are used in your educational niche. Don’t just guess these terms; take the time to find out what they are. You might even consider surveying your students and faculty to discover the exact terminology.

Keep Tabs on Rival Schools

Listening can uncover amazing insight about how your competitors are presenting themselves online, how they’re employing social media, and where there might be unmet needs in the community that you can fill.

Competitive intelligence used to be limited to expensive reports from business intelligence companies, or whatever information you could glean through your network of acquaintances, friends, and contacts. The social web has brought a new dimension to competitive analysis, and put a wealth of information out there for the taking.

Watch how rival schools are marketing themselves online and how people are engaging with them. How do they position themselves, and how does that match up with the way potential students or outside faculty describe them? How do they deal with student issues and school crises? What kind of content are they producing, and how are they distributing it?

Collect Student Feedback

Are students complaining about the lack of vegetarian options in the cafeteria? Wondering if their credits are going to transfer from their last school? Applauding the great lecture they just had?

Understanding what people love and hate about your school can help you figure out how to better satisfy applicants, students, faculty, donors, and the wider public. Social media supplies voluntary feedback without the cost of focus groups.

Monitor keywords that include phrases that imply your academic programs or admissions marketing have room for improvement. (If everyone’s hung up on the same thing, you’ll know exactly what to fix.)

You could use social media listening tools to monitor for mentions of your school like these:

- “wish [school] had”
- “[school] really needs”

- “would attend [school] but”
- “decided not to apply for [school]”
- “don’t go to [school]”

Identify Influential Advocates (and Detractors)

One of the most beneficial things you can do on the social web is foster strong connections with those who love your school the most. After all, they’re the people who will vocally celebrate your successes, refer students your way, and even defend your brand in the face of criticism.

Listening carefully means that you’ll know not only where the most active conversations are about you, but who is the most vocal, connected, and enthusiastic about what you do. You’ll also find the squeakiest wheels about particular pain points that need attention. Not every influencer is friendly, and you need to know who your detractors are.

Perhaps you’re spending time building a blog when passionate advocates are active on discussion forums. There might be groups on Facebook that you haven’t participated in, and could signal an opportunity for a presence there. And you might think you want to reach students, but the parents are talking you up enthusiastically.

Listening is the key to understanding who your best advocates are and where they spend their time.

Chapter 5 / Plan Engagement Tactics

It's long been known that the social connections students make, especially in their first year, are critical to increasing retention rates.

You can use social media engagement to foster those connections in two ways. Initiate conversations by offering interactive experiences, useful content, and stimulating questions. Respond to conversations by jumping in, being helpful, and routing conversations to the right people.

Engaging consistently in these two ways can bring an already tightly-knit campus community even closer together.

Below are some ways to spark conversations with your audience.

Give a Glimpse of Campus Life

What's the classroom experience? What's special about the student union? What are some of the other students like? What makes you different from all the other schools mailing your potential student a pamphlet? [Use video to emulate the campus tour](#) to give prospective students an idea of what to expect after enrollment or create excitement about the football team's Friday night game.

Spread the Good News

As long as you tie news back to a value statement for your community, social media can be a great conduit for sharing university accolades, stories about award-winning faculty, and university research accomplishments.

Ask and Answer Questions

Provide a medium for students, faculty, parents and alumni to provide feedback, and let them know they've been heard. The Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania [invites their community](#) to shape their Lifelong Learning Program by submitting and upvoting suggestions about pressing business topics and societal challenges they'd like Wharton to address.

Tell Stories about Student Success

When dealing with the stress of comparing colleges or pulling an all-nighter studying for finals, a compelling and true success story about an alum landing a dream job can inspire and rejuvenate students.

Reward Advocacy

You have students and alumni who are die-hard fans. They couldn't be more proud of their school, and they make a point to show it on Facebook and Twitter. Often this rubs off on their peers, and may ultimately influence others' perceptions. Give these advocates a virtual pat on the back by featuring them on the blog or Facebook Page.

Foster Student-to-Student or Faculty-to-Faculty Discussion

Every person's experience at your college or university is unique, but everyone could benefit from easier ways to find and connect with classmates, peers, extracurricular organizations, or study and interest groups. Consider creating a custom on-site message board, social network or Facebook application to help students and faculty to branch out or share ideas.

Help Students Make Connections

DeVry University is using social media channels like [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) to facilitate conversations between students and experts in their field of study. They also started [using LinkedIn groups to help alumni connect](#) with professionals in their field and hosted networking events to help bring these engagements full circle.

Write an Engagement Playbook

The other aspect of engagement is all about getting the right conversations to the right people. When the admissions office has the ability to field questions over the web, and support services can respond to an issue on campus based on an e-request, everyone feels as if their needs are addressed.

Leaping in without a plan may feel more authentic, but you'll either be overwhelmed by the volume of conversations, frozen by situations you hadn't anticipated, or, worst of all, ignite a social media controversy with an ill-considered response.

You need an engagement playbook to adequately care for your community. Your playbook should cover:

- How to classify conversations and posts you encounter
- Which ones to respond to — and which ones to ignore
- How team members get assigned posts
- The escalation process for critical posts

For more information read our free ebook: [Social Media Playbook - Why Do I Need One?](#).

Chapter 6 / Plan for Content Creation

Setting up a Facebook Page or Twitter account is easy. Using social media channels to foster authentic conversations with a community without a content plan is not.

Whether a video, blog post or status update, content is the engine of the social web: it's what gives brands something to talk about with their communities.

Welcome to content marketing, where the big idea is this: if you produce and share fantastically useful content, your community will grow like crazy, attracting more students, donors, and faculty members.

Choose Themes and Topics

When schools adopt social media as part of their communications strategy, they often hit a brick wall when faced with what to talk about. Or write. Or Tweet.

Remember, the best content is when your knowledge and passion intersect with your community's deepest needs. Here are nine ways to find what topics your community is hungry for.

1. Ask students directly.
2. Ask your recruitment and admissions teams.
3. Ask your faculty.
4. Follow and listen to prospective students on Twitter.
5. Join higher education LinkedIn groups.
6. Follow and listen to higher education news sources.
7. Discover keywords in web analytics.
8. Monitor higher education conversations.
9. Monitor competing schools.

Select Media Types

Here are the main online media you should consider adding to your mix.

- **Blog post.** Commentary or news hosted on either a regularly-updated standalone website or section of a website.
- **E-Newsletter.** A regular email from your school that subscribers receive because they signed up for it.
- **Webinar.** A live online presentation where attendees can log in remotely to interact with each other and ask questions via phone or computer.
- **Ebook.** An electronic book, usually distributed as a PDF, around 10 to 20 pages long.
- **Success Story.** The tale of how a student, alumni or faculty member achieved success through your school.
- **Video**
- **Podcast.** A regular audio show or a series of audio recordings to which users can subscribe via iTunes or other software.

For a more detailed look at these, we highly recommend you read the book [Content Rules](#) by our good friends Ann Handley and C.C. Chapman.

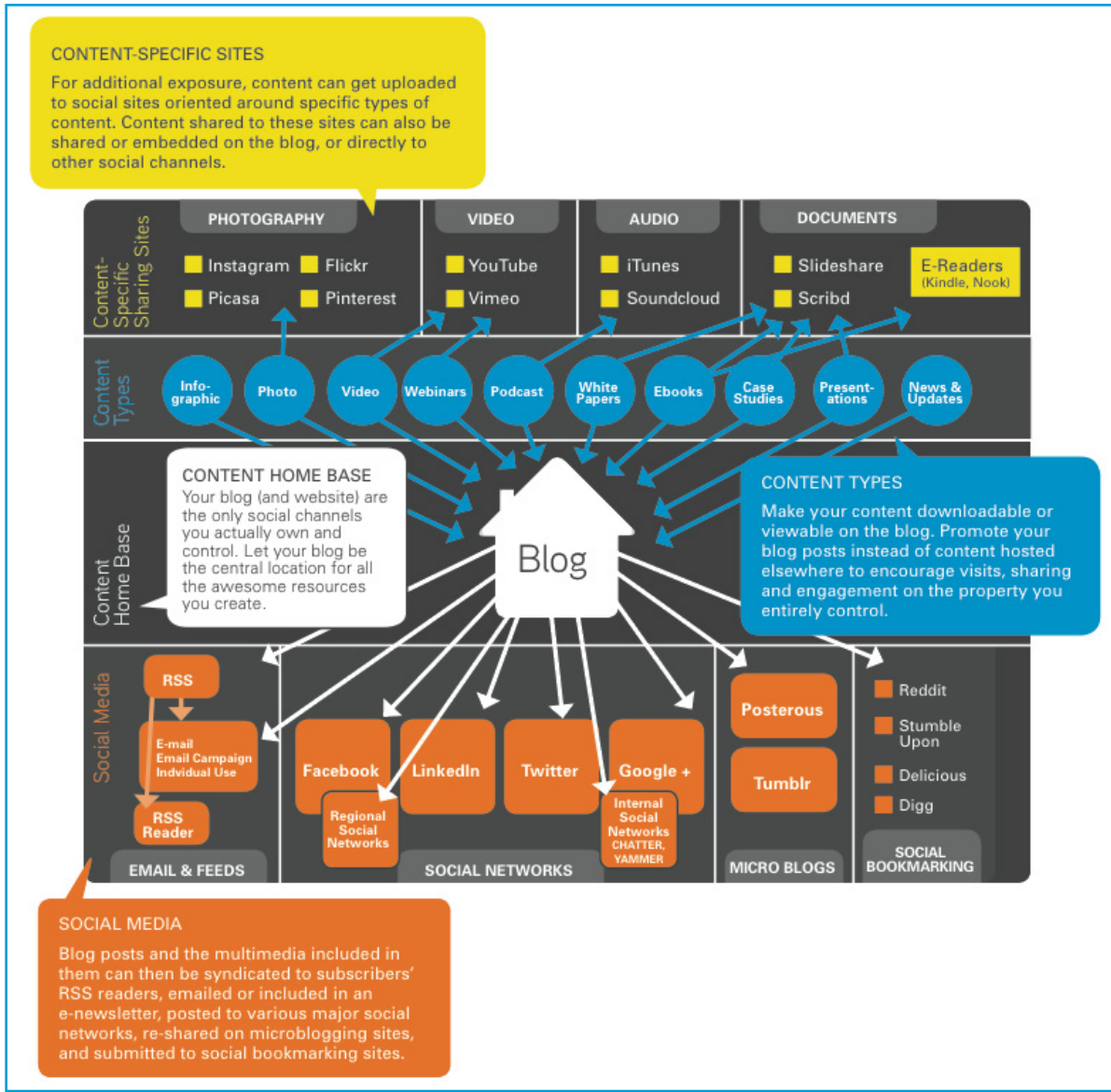
Use a Content Calendar

Create an editorial calendar to keep your team on track. We recommend planning what content will be created when and by whom at least six months in advance so your team has plenty of time to make it happen. Without it, it's too easy to become digital dust. This doesn't mean that you must follow the calendar and never relate to current activities on campus and in the news, but the calendar is meant to guide your efforts in a coordinated fashion.

Distribute Your Content

Use your blog as the content hub where you publish (or link to) all of your content. Then distribute on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube — whichever channels where your targeted audience hangs out.

The distribution map below should help you visualize how content can get published systematically to different channels with the blog serving as the central hub.



Want to learn more about content marketing? Explore the topic in our recent ebook: [How to Craft a Successful Social Media Content Marketing Plan](#).

Chapter 7 / Measure Your Efforts

We can't emphasize enough that what you measure must line up with the goals you've set. If your stated goal is to increase online admissions applications, but you're only measuring Facebook fans and Twitter followers, your original goal will be forgotten.

Focus on the metrics that relate to your objectives.

Awareness, Attention and Reach

How do you measure the effectiveness of social conversations and relationships? Awareness, attention and reach.

Your potential reach includes everyone who is sharing your content, plus everyone in their networks. For example, if you have 10,000 fans and followers, and together they have 200,000 followers, then you have a potential reach of 210,000.

Your share of conversation measures what percentage of social media posts about a carefully- defined topic mention your school. If 50,000 of the 80,000 posts mentioning "engineering" and "school" also mentioned "MIT", then MIT's share of conversation is 62.5%.

Your strength of referrals measures how many people who received a recommendation to attend your school, apply for a position, or make a donation actually became a lead.

Conversions, Applications and Donations

Most beginners think social media measurement is about counting the number of eyeballs. But what really matters is the actions those people take as a result of your social media efforts.

The quickest (and roughest) approach is to record correlation. This compares your social media activity with broader effects in your organization. For example, a \$50,000 investment in social media (time, money, or both) might correlate with a \$250,000 increase in donations or a 7% increase in student applications over the same time period. (Keep in mind, of course, that correlation does not imply causation.)

The real value of conversion rates comes when you look at the aggregate of all of your social media initiatives. Conversion, in this case, means anything you would qualify as a successful interaction according to your goals. Here are some examples:

- Email newsletter sign up

- Blog subscription
- Contact form submission
- Content download
- Contest entry
- Application submission

Measuring and Optimizing Conversions

Whether you're using a spreadsheet or a CRM system to keep track of your conversions, you'll want a way to designate the source of the conversion. You can even split that source into specific social channels: blog subscribers, Twitter followers, LinkedIn contacts, etc. For example:

- Note conversions that come from a direct source, like a blog subscription.
- Include a field on your contact form that asks visitors how they found your website.
- Note conversions that come from offline events.
- Note referral traffic to your site from social networks.
- Map a contact form submission or a click on a "Contact Us" back to the source.
- Track requests for content downloads from email signups.

After you've gathered all this information, look at these stats in total.

- How many conversions do you generate each month that are from social media?
- How do your conversions translate into student applications, donations or other critical metrics?
- Can you create a program that nurtures social media contacts through a series of touch points that leads to student applications, donations or other critical metrics?

Many CRM platforms, such as salesforce.com, allow you to track the stages of an individual contact, whether the prospect is brand new, or whether they're in deeper consideration and talks with your recruitment and development offices. You can also look at the prospects that originate in social networks and see how they're distributed across those stages over time.

For more on measurement, read our ebooks: [5 Steps to Effective Social Media Measurement](#) and [ROI of Social Media: Myths, Truths and How to Measure](#).

Conclusion / Create Your Plan and Get Social!

We hope we've equipped you with a good understanding of what social media strategy for higher education can look like, and hope you feel prepared and inspired to create or improve your institution's very own social media strategy.

Since we covered quite a bit, we leave you with one last reminder:

Start Small. Focus on Your Objectives. Then Grow.





With so many benefits and possibilities of social media listening and engagement, it's easy to get overwhelmed or lose focus. Don't worry about having a presence on every social channel or trying to tackle every content type at once. Only take on what you and your team can manage, and allow for expansions as you become more efficient.

Have fun and good luck.

Questions, comments or feedback for us? Please get in touch. We'd love to hear from you.



Have questions? Contact us:

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