

# THE SEA OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Navigating the digital world using your strategic plan

By ROBERT M. MOORE

The social media environment is much like a coral reef—a living, growing, dynamic entity filled with billions of independent organisms or ideas attaching themselves to each other and creating something glorious. But like a reef, these free-floating ideas need to be nurtured by a robust and healthy ecosystem if they are to remain vital. In the education advancement community, that vitality can be sustained through a comprehensive and well-thought-out strategic plan.

It's not news that social media usage has exploded throughout the education sector. Facebook, YouTube, MySpace, Flickr, Twitter, LinkedIn, WordPress, Ning, Digg, blogs, proprietary networks, and targeted interactive microsites are all regularly deployed to meet strategic objectives such as attracting the interest of prospective students, capturing media attention, engaging the campus community, building alumni loyalty, and generating revenue. Social media have more than arrived—they are now



the life of the party. But how much of this is “new toy” syndrome and how much is actually delivering results on your communications goals?

Like many institutions, Keele University in Staffordshire, England, began its first official Facebook group—Forever:Keele—in response to an alumnus who started his own Keele page, rather than in conjunction with a larger social media plan. Hannah Hiles, a media and communications officer at the university admits that Keele doesn’t have a way of measuring how worthwhile the official presence is other than anecdotally and subjectively. “But since our audiences were going to be involved, we knew we had to be a presence, too,” she says.

Regardless of how it starts, social media in advancement is growing. A 2008 study by Nora Ganim Barnes from the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth and Eric Mattson of the

research firm Financial Insite documented that 41 percent of admissions offices are blogging, 61 percent are involved in social media, 48 percent are videoblogging, and 16 percent are podcasting. Moreover, nearly 90 percent of the 536 respondents said they regard these activities as either “somewhat” or “very” important.

So why are so many institutions sailing through the social media waters without knowing where they are headed? Take a look at some typical communications strategic objectives and how colleges and universities are building an environment where their social media efforts can thrive.

#### BUILDING THE BRAND

At Carnegie Mellon University in Pennsylvania, social media have been enthusiastically adopted “to engage with the community at large in an authentic and genuine way,” says Jay Brown, director of marketing for Web communications. “We’ve been able to open doors that conventional marketing hadn’t allowed. Prospects are able to see the community behind the ‘curtain’ of the school,” he says.

Perhaps of even greater importance at Carnegie Mellon is the effective integration of a variety of platforms—each of them linked to the others and effectively branded. The YouTube channel shows the university’s mascot, Scotty, sprawled comfortably at the top of the page and provides easy links to Twitter, Facebook, and iTunes U (a branch of iTunes where students can download audio and video lectures and other educational resources).

The Facebook site itself also links to other social media sites, including ongoing Twitter feeds. But more than just a presence, Carnegie Mellon also has *content*, with more than 11,000 lectures, commercials, and student-produced videos on YouTube, including some that have become Internet sensations.

In the world of social media, such viral content is king; giving the masses “something to talk about” is the most important thing you can do for the school’s brand. At the University of Minnesota, a branded YouTube channel labeled “Driven to Discover” includes dozens of videos generated by the institution and its students, featuring both research advances and institutional ads, as well as athletic, student life, and other special-focus videos.

In the most-viewed category on the channel is a clip on the science of the movie *Watchmen* that has received more than 1.5 million views since it was posted after the movie opened. The video clip, starring physics professor James Kakalios, both debunks the movie’s science (“there is no such thing as an ‘intrinsic field’”) and discusses light spectrum physics and wave action.

Site branding—both in the institutional Web presence and on pages and channels mounted on shared application sites—is critically important. Visitors are slipping from one site to another in search of the next area of interest, the newest video, or the most interesting blog, and site branding reminds them who is showcasing the content that they’re viewing.

At the University of Miami, a new Web site ([www.miami.edu](http://www.miami.edu)) is sharing content through social media tools. Designed to showcase Miami’s research prowess and its residential academic community, the Web site uses tags, filters, and social bookmarking to deliver news to the home page

that highlights institutional strategic initiatives. And when the university made it into the *U.S. News & World Report* Top 50, university communicators had an upbeat, extemporaneous spot by President Donna Shalala on the Web site that same day.

At the university’s Rosenstiel School of Marine and Atmospheric Science, Dean Roni Avissar sees social media outreach through blogs, Facebook, and other platforms as an effective means to create greater understanding of the issues that his school addresses with donors, students, and media representatives.

“A typical faculty member doesn’t have time to engage in social media activities,” Avissar admits. “It’s not part of their evaluation criteria. But university communicators can help by sitting down with faculty who are doing innovative research and helping them get the right stories in the right venues.”

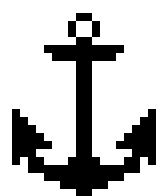
Jackie Menendez, vice president for university communications at Miami, concurs. “It’s the job of university communicators to see that this kind

of dialogue happens, and the Rosenstiel School is the perfect place to get into the conversation in earnest,” she says. “The issues that Rosenstiel addresses—climate change, coral reef degradation, oceanic habitat, hurricane prediction—are generating intense conversations in blogs and elsewhere. We owe it to the school and to the importance of the underlying science to make sure that Rosenstiel’s voice is heard and knowledge is disseminated.”

#### CONNECTING THE CLASS

More than a year ago, Joan Fallon of the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana launched a Facebook page to draw students in from all over the world. Facebook’s ubiquity and growing global reach were an important part of the institute’s outreach strategy.

“We are being very deliberate about linking to our Web site and using all the ‘share this’ tools both on our own Web site and on Facebook,” says Fallon, adding, “We post a lot of photos because



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## in short

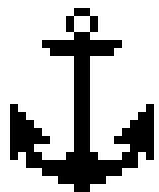
#### SWIMMING UPSTREAM.

Although online video can be fun and functional, it’s still a one-way conversation, with the user always the listener and never the speaker. Duke University is changing that. In a new partnership with Ustream, the university is showcasing an “Office Hours” series in which viewers can interact live with professors from a variety of fields. Viewers not only hear and see what these world-class experts are saying, but they can also ask questions via e-mail or Twitter during the live video stream. Past broadcast topics include the environment and religion in the media. To join in the conversation, visit [www.ustream.tv/dukeuniversity](http://www.ustream.tv/dukeuniversity).

**FAST FACTS.** Institutions that want their videos to become the next Internet sensation need to learn how to go from vanillia to viral. In July, YouTube released the “Statistics and Data” feature, which may unlock the answer. The section, found beneath each video, allows users to see metrics about the views, including how many people commented about the video, how many users made it a favorite, viewer demographics, and how people were referred to the video. For more information about how to use this new feature, click on the “Get Help” link on the bottom of the YouTube Web page and search for “statistics.”

**STAND-OUTS IN SOCIAL MEDIA.** Twitter users fit a more distinct profile than those of Facebook and MySpace or bloggers. A recent study by the Pew Internet & American Life Project shows that Twitter users are more on-the-go than other Internet users, with 76 percent tweeting from a mobile device. They are also more urban and diverse than the typical Internet user, with only 9 percent living in a rural area. They are more likely to read a blog, with 57 percent saying they have, compared to 29 percent of non-Twitter users. For more details on what makes a tweeter tick, visit [pewresearch.org](http://pewresearch.org) and search for “Twitter.”

**SOCIAL LIFE.** Prospective students aren’t stopping to smell the roses these days—they aren’t even stopping to check their messages. According to the Nielsen Company, Web visitors in the 13–17 age group who use a mobile device have increased 45 percent since last year. Advancement professionals should think about how to reach this audience once they arrive on campus, since the data show that 84 percent of teenagers text and 27 percent download content to their mobile devices. For more demographic information on mobile media, visit [blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/online\\_mobile](http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/online_mobile).



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we did research and found that Facebook is the No. 1 photo-sharing site.”

Marquette University in Wisconsin also uses Facebook to make its students, even those that haven't arrived on campus yet, more engaged. The institution created a Class of 2013 Facebook group that allows incoming freshmen to ask questions of current students and admissions staff. With more than 1,000 members and 86 discussion topics, the site “helps students start the bonding process and breaks down barriers among students long before they set foot on campus,” emphasizes Marquette University's Vice President for Marketing and

Communication Tricia Geraghty. “Having a real person answer real questions gives incoming freshmen a personal connection to Marquette.”

Since Keele University's initial foray into Facebook, Hiles has been using

the site along with Twitter not only to connect students to each other, but also to reach them herself. “I have all feeds set up to search for mention of Keele,” she recounts. “One chap was going to choose between Keele and two other universities. I followed him on Twitter and sent him a message with a link to our Keele 2009 Facebook site. He was a bit freaked out. He didn't think that the university would pay him any attention. But a few days later, he tweeted that Keele was his firm choice. It really helped that the university was interested in him on a personal level.”

Like Marquette, Keele has also had success launching a Facebook group focused on creating a conversation among accepted students. The Keele 2009 group has links to the main Keele site, its Twitter feed, student life and cultural activities, and other hot topics. With nearly 1,000 members and 101 discussion topics—including Gays in the Village, Accommodation, and Sporty People—the Keele site is a lively hub of activity. “Our current students absolutely love Keele,” emphasizes Hiles. “Their comments are more powerful than anything we can say as an institution.”

### CALLING ALL ALUMNI

Social media tools are not just for prospective or current students. For decades, engaging alumni—particularly young alumni—has been a challenge, but social media sites have changed that.

Although the motivation that typically drove involvement at homecoming and reunion—“come back to see what your friends are doing”—has been significantly eroded by the ubiquity of Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn, and other social media sites, if used correctly, those sites can actually galvanize on-campus alumni activities.

At Keele, an on-campus reunion that was almost cancelled was saved because more than 400 people signed up for it on Facebook, explains Hiles. “It has now become the flagship event on our alumni calendar. We also find social networking a very effective way of recovering lost contacts—LinkedIn is particularly good for this—and for reinforcing one of Keele's real strengths as a friendly, open, and lively community.”

Bill Lowery, vice president for development and external relations at Claremont McKenna College in California, is also a LinkedIn maven. “CMC people love to network,” he claims. “We show the benefits of networking while our students are on campus, and it becomes part of their DNA as alumni. Our LinkedIn group has 1,600 members and we only have 10,000 alumni—that's a real signal to us that CMC alumni want to use these social platforms to stay connected.”

Social media sites like LinkedIn can connect alumni to each other, but tools can also be used to connect alumni back to the school. When Newman University in Kansas launched a humorous, viral site ([www.freethecamels.com](http://www.freethecamels.com)) to increase awareness for prospective students, they were surprised to find that alumni also liked the site. With the philosophy of “let's fan it the direction it burns,” Director of Communications Kelly Snedden began using the site to collect stories from alumni.

The media-rich site, including announcer voice-overs from Newman “legends” (such as the student who became forevermore known as Linus because he was once dragged to an all-school assembly in his pajamas), has captured the attention of alumni and received strong support from university leadership.

At the University of California, Berkeley, the advancement team is working with social media not just to connect with alumni, but also to make the ask. After an initial Web site launched in 2005—[bigideas.berkeley.edu](http://bigideas.berkeley.edu)—the idea of connecting funders with students online expanded to a “philanthropic marketplace,” where alumni and other donors can support interdisciplinary student teams that are tackling global, regional, and local challenges such as clean energy, public health, beautifying Berkeley, and technology-based entrepreneurship.

Originally funded by a grant from eBay founder Pierre Omidyar and matched by the university, the site has created a robust community. Nearly 150 research projects were proposed in 2009 for the Bears Breaking Boundaries competition, with 33 of them receiving seed funding in amounts from \$500 to \$13,000. Moreover, the site has kept Berkeley's vibrancy and intellectual dynamism front and center in the minds of alumni and

friends, while keeping the conversation going—and funded—among a variety of stakeholders.

As Chancellor Robert Birgeneau has stressed, “Cal students have great ideas for addressing some of the biggest challenges of the 21st century. This marketplace will help them mobilize additional financial and in-kind resources to support their ideas, and [it will] recruit additional committed students.”

Whether institutions use social media to meet the strategic goals of branding, recruiting, or connecting, advancement offices need to follow an integrated plan to be successful. The social media environment is beautiful and variegated, filled with lovely and graceful inhabitants, as well as the occasional shark gliding by. Your students and prospects, alumni and donors, and friends and neighbors are already in the water. It's time to take the plunge and join them. ■

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