

University Administration Social Media Best Practices and Guidelines

Overview

Social media is a powerful tool to share unit information and messaging. Like any tool, it is most effective when used in accordance with its strengths; one would not, for instance, use a hammer to paint.

Social media is about having conversations and making connections¹. It has an inherently viral component; readers share content that they find valuable, which increases the size of the audience receiving your messaging. Social media is not static, and it should not be one-way.

Most importantly, social media is about the audience, not the content provider. An audience is not captive; they can choose whether or not to receive, share, and engage with content. When the audience ceases to find value in unit content, they will leave, limiting not only access to them but to those that they would have passed content on to.

Because of this, after determining the goal of the unit social media presence, it is important to next determine what audience would be the most useful to the service of that goal, and then to determine what that audience wants. Knowing what the audience wants will guide you in crafting messaging that will appeal to them.

Appealing content must also be varied and not solely unit-related. Readers dislike content² that is strictly self-promoting. Posting items of unit value such as news releases and pride points is clearly a goal of the unit's social media presence, but a presence that only contains those items will not attract or keep reader interest, and there is no value in promoting items if no audience views them. A common guideline is the rule of thirds³: one-third of your posts should be dedicated to self-promotion, one-third to relevant trends, and the final third to more social interactions. In the context of University accounts, an office might post about a research initiative, a study by an affiliated industry group, and a retweet of a lightly related item of interest from another party. It is valuable to track other bodies whose missions or interests align with those of your unit, so that you can share their content and position your unit as part of a greater conversation. For instance, a unit that promotes University research might post that a valued publication's data indicate the value of University research.

¹ <http://www.marcensign.com/which-social-media-site-should-you-use-for-the-greatest-roi/>

² <http://shoutitoutdesign.com/be-a-social-media-marketing-failure-in-5-easy-steps/>

³ <http://www.cision.com/us/2013/09/the-twitter-rule-of-thirds-3-tweets-3-tools/>

UA units should consider following and cross-promoting other, related UA and campus units on a particular medium. For example, AITS follows CITES, ACCC, and ITS. Similarly, University Relations follows the public affairs units from the three campuses.

Beyond content it is good to keep an eye on the tone of posts. Readers are less attracted⁴ to tones that are flat or sterile and prefer to hear from and engage with content providers on a more personal level. This is not to say that the tone should be glib or over-familiar; it is important to represent the University, and your unit, with a tone that is professional. A measure of authenticity, however, humanizes the content and gives readers a sense that they are interacting with a person, not simply a PR machine.

The tone should be to be consistent throughout the content stream. A social media team, rather than a single person, may be needed depending on the volume of messaging the unit plans to create and post. To maintain the tone and to be sure that all posts are in line with unit goals, team members need to collaborate and communicate, while still being nimble enough to post items, especially breaking items, in a timely fashion.

UA units considering establishing a social media team should have a well-developed plan that take into account the key considerations listed below. Team members should be clearly identified and no more than two staff members should assume coordinating and oversight responsibility.

The workload of the social media staff can be reduced by using a tool that allows for scheduled postings. The danger in using scheduled postings is that projects or presentations may be cancelled, or current events may cause posts to seem insensitive in context. An example of this is a scheduled post from the NRA that appeared while a school shooting situation was playing out. Members of your team should keep an eye on the timing and content of posts that are scheduled, and they should also be ready to respond to reader conversation attempts⁵.

It may be best to think of social media as the equivalent of a very brief elevator conversation. If asked about the best thing happening in your unit right now, or the most important project you are working on, in one sentence what would you say and in what tone? How would that change if the person asking the question was from the media, from the University, a student, a legislator? Conversely, if you were asking that question of someone else in your unit or an affiliated unit, what would most interest you? Let that guide you.

All posts on social media are to be in compliance with federal and state laws and regulations and University policies.

⁴ <http://www.receptional.com/blog/setting-the-right-tone-in-your-social-media>

⁵ http://www.ragan.com/Main/Articles/3_ways_youre_still_screwing_up_social_media_47931.aspx

Key Considerations

The key considerations when designing a social media strategy and before starting your posts are:

1. Goals
2. Audience
3. Content and Tone
4. Staffing and Process
5. Platform
6. Value

1. Goals

Why does the unit want a social media presence? The goal of your unit's social presence will direct all unit social media actions, so it is crucial to have a goal in mind. Common unit goals may include:

- Raising awareness of the unit
- Increasing attendance at events
- Improving relationships with alumni, students, community partners, legislators, media and others
- Gathering support for unit initiatives
- Increasing adherence to deadlines and procedures

2. Audience

Once unit goals are understood determine what audiences are interested in your message and what audiences the unit wants to reach. Common audiences, and the content they may be interested in, include:

- Internal University (faculty and staff as well as students)
 - End-of-year financial deadlines
 - New training opportunities or mandatory training dates
 - Faculty-staff discount programs
 - Faculty-staff award and recognition programs and deadlines
 - Student financial deadlines, such as tuition payments
- Local media and community partners
 - Presentations, concerts, and programs open to the public
 - Opportunities to collaborate with local businesses
 - Student-staff good works affecting the community
- Broad distribution media – major state and national outlets
 - Major research achievements
 - Good works and excellence with a wide impact
 - Precedent-setting initiatives

3. Content and Tone

When creating content, keep in mind that while posts are intended to represent only your unit, they also represent the University as a whole. Content needs to support the unit goals and humanize your unit, while remaining in line with University values. For example:

- Headlines of, and links to, unit news releases
- References to media mentions of unit achievements
- References to media items that can be contextualized to your unit
- References to items of greater University or social significance
- Sociable items regarding academic holidays or weather events
- Items of personal interest to the social media staff; if the unit finds it interesting, readers may as well. Be certain that these items reflect on something in your professional sphere.

Some content – that would not align with University values or could, if misinterpreted, harm the reputation of the unit or University – generally should be avoided by units. For example:

- Items about controversial topics
- Items that could be seen as showing prejudice towards protected groups

Units should be aware of the Urbana Campus Administrative Guidelines Concerning Use of University Resources for Political Campaign Activities. A link to these guidelines is in the Resources section at the end of this document. Likewise be aware of state ethics laws and University and campus ethical guidelines and codes of conduct. Links to examples of these materials on ethics and conduct are at the end of this document.

Also be aware of confidential unit, employee or student information, particularly in relation to FERPA and HIPAA. FERPA guidelines are in the Resources section at the end of this document.

As a general rule, if an item seems at all questionable or might spur intense debate, do not post it.

Social media's benefit is that it is active, not static. Be interactive and have conversations with the audience; just sending releases bores people and bored people are not receptive to your messaging.

Be authentic but remain consistent to the unit brand; a post as simple as a “thank you” or “we agree” or “glad to hear it” is valuable, as it shows interaction, conversation, and a human rather than PR machine touch. Be wary, however, of responses that are more glib than your branding or usual tone would suggest.

A professional tone on social media is one that makes a unit relatable without becoming informal. Consider your unit “personality” and be authentic while exercising some restraint.

Staff who are involved in social media may have personal accounts. The University has no interest in restricting the free speech of employees as private citizens. However, individual employees whose

accounts serve a dual role as both personal and a way to share department information should be cognizant of the fact that their personal posts may be seen as a reflection on the University. We recommend that employees keep their personal and professional posts on separate accounts. An employee whose personal profile highlights their professional role may be misinterpreted as speaking for the unit, much as unit accounts may be incorrectly seen as speaking for the University. We ask that employees simply remain aware of this and consider their posts accordingly.

4. Staffing and Process

Introducing a social media presence requires staff to take on additional responsibilities. It is important that the unit head be supportive of the endeavor and aware of the additional commitment. The staff who will be involved, and your unit head, need to discuss the various issues in this document and determine what resources (staffing, time) should be allocated to the project.

How much time can you commit? Social media involvement can expand to fill the resources allotted. This is a note of caution but also of opportunity. A unit that uses a team approach can be timely, nimble, and highly engaging. Using a team allows for internal review of items for appropriateness and accuracy before posting. Spreading the work of maintaining a social media account among a team reduces each individual's time commitment but can help maintain an appropriate volume of posts.

If a unit has a single point of contact, that person must dedicate more work time and may be less able to balance nimble responses with other responsibilities. These units may rely more on scheduled tweets and re-posting information from other University social media outlets or news bureaus.

For example, your unit might determine that maintaining a social media presence will require 10 hours per week. Those 10 hours could be provided by one person (25 percent of her job) or by five people (two hours per person or five percent of each person's job).

At least in the beginning of a social media presence, your unit head should be aware of the content being promoted. As the team becomes comfortable with the style and content that are desired and appropriate, unit head involvement may be scaled back such that items of concern are presented for review, but more general posts do not need oversight at that level.

5. Platform

Every social media platform has strengths and weaknesses and reaches different audiences. The type of content the unit will promote, the audience to be reached, the tone expected to be used, and the size of the staff all impact the proper choice of platform. Monitor usage trends for the many social media options to make sure that you are using the optimal platform(s) for your audience.

Keep in mind your office goals when considering which social media platforms are best for your unit. For instance, many current high school students do not have Facebook accounts and are instead

using platforms like Instagram or Snapchat. To connect with in-coming students, therefore, Facebook might not be the ideal medium.

The three most commonly used platforms are:

- a. Facebook
- b. Twitter
- c. LinkedIn

- a. Facebook

Facebook pages are good for units that want to have conversations with external audiences. The average Facebook user is younger and, in the context of a business account, and reads Facebook to learn about products or to ask questions regarding a product or service⁶. Facebook is best for sharing links and photos and for engaging with users by asking questions or seeking input⁷. Facebook is not good for reaching internal audiences or for distributing news items. Units using Facebook should expect to post frequently to maintain interest; plan to post at least once per day.

- b. Twitter

Twitter pages are good for units that want to share news items, especially breaking news, or to promote events⁸. Twitter has a limited number of characters (140) that can be posted in a given entry; it is well suited to posting links that drive traffic to an article or event page. Because Twitter feeds move quickly, units should plan to post several times a day and to repeat topics on multiple days. Twitter has a broad user base and reaches many segments of the population. Twitter is less useful for engaging in dialogue or sharing photos.

Other UA or campus units will likely retweet (RT) some items so make sure any tweets are an appropriate reflection of your unit.

- c. LinkedIn

LinkedIn is used for professional networking rather than informal conversation. LinkedIn is most valuable for connecting staff and positioning staff as University ambassadors⁹. Staff who connect to these pages send a message about the value of the University and of their units. External audiences who see staff profiles will see the talents and strengths of unit staff and, accordingly, of the unit and the administration.

Each campus has a LinkedIn page, as does UA. Units that do not need to network their unit or staff with external constituents would not find value in maintaining a unit LinkedIn page. Staff in these units are encouraged to affiliate themselves with the UA LinkedIn page. Units

⁶ <http://socialmediatoday.com/tompick/1647801/101-vital-social-media-and-digital-marketing-statistics-rest-2013>

⁷ <http://lifehacker.com/which-social-network-should-i-use-894808717>

⁸ <http://www.forbes.com/sites/thesba/2013/04/17/as-a-business-owner-which-social-media-platform-should-you-use/>

⁹ <http://www.forbes.com/sites/williamarruda/2014/01/07/why-every-employee-at-your-company-should-use-linkedin/>

that engage external audiences may wish to create a page as a nexus for networking and collaborating with others in their spheres of interest and responsibility.

A LinkedIn group can be a forum for information exchange and a way for UA offices to have conversations between professionals.

6. Value

Social media requires a sizeable investment of unit resources. You will need to evaluate the success of your program to determine how to further allocate resources towards it. Programs like Hootsuite include analytics to demonstrate the value of your program in terms of readership, message sharing, and other platform-specific metrics. Keep in mind that it takes time to develop a following.

General Best Practices

Account Management

Use a management tool (Hootsuite is recommended for Twitter and Facebook accounts) that allows a team to share the account, see what items have been posted or are queued for posting, and create analytics. If your unit has more than one account, these tools also allow multiple accounts to be managed from a central location.

Social media outlets do not archive material. Create a shared file to log what items were posted and when.

Create a schedule of which team members are responsible for postings on a given topic or a given day to avoid overlap. Make this known within your unit to allow for substitutions during vacation or sick days.

Most social media sites use a single login. Because of this, your unit should create a shared email address and password to use on these sites. It is important to keep this information secure to avoid the account being abused by unauthorized parties.

Transparency

Disclose your identity. The unit, department, or program affiliation should be part of the title or description of your social media account. State explicitly that the account speaks only for the respective unit or group and not the University; however, do not use this as license to post items that might reflect poorly on the University. Readers are likely to see only the messaging, not the unit main page; as such, disclaimers may not be seen. Furthermore, any reader unfamiliar with the intricacies of University organization and structure will likely presume that all official media feeds are approved by a central body. A unit's messaging, which neither represents nor speaks for the University, will still reflect on the University and should be composed with that in mind¹⁰.

¹⁰ <http://www.ragan.com/Main/Articles/47997.aspx>

Tone, branding and style

Determine the unit brand and be consistent. Units that serve students, researchers, faculty, or staff will wish to promote their purpose and strengths. A unit focused on ethics or HR, for example, may not wish to post items regarding student events unless directly related to their unit goals.

Keep the tone professional but cordial, and in line with your unit branding and strategy. Readers prefer to be spoken to, not at. Know your audience: a student audience will respond to a more breezy tone while staff and faculty likely appreciate humor but prefer more restraint.

Any logos or images, including page backgrounds, icons, or profile pictures, should be in line with the University Administration identity standards. Details are available on the University Administration identity standards page, listed in the Resources section. Also be sensitive to campus image preferences; for instance, use of campus logos or brands by units may be limited to certain areas such as just athletics or just education, or even when they may be used in that area. Campus identity details are also available in the Resources section.

Create a posting policy to ensure that all posts are in line with the unit tone and brand. Example posting policies are available on the campus best practices websites listed in the Resources section.

Reach and reciprocity

Social media has no value without an audience to read your messaging. As previously mentioned, social media is an interactive medium and the audience is not captive. Your audience learns about you when you introduce yourself, and that is done by following those you wish to follow you. We recommend that you begin by following other UA and campus accounts on your chosen medium, as well as media, legislative, or industry accounts that have been selected as a potential audience. We also ask that you advise the Office for University Relations of your account for inclusion on the list of University social media. Make it easy for your audience to find you by sharing links to your social media accounts on your unit website and your newsletters, and include them in your email signatures.

Writing and Posting Better Content

Social media content follows the same guidelines as news writing, with some variations to accommodate various social media mediums. Social media products accommodate small blocks of content, so a post should be treated as a long headline.

Posts should inform and interest readers, and make them want to know more. Tell the reader why they should care about the unit's message¹¹.

When using a post as a teaser for linked content, write posts that deliver on the promises, make sure the linked content matches the post, and avoid posts that are too obscure. Keep readers interested, but follow through on their expectations, and don't make them work to decide if the article is of interest.

¹¹ <http://www.ragan.com/Main/Articles/47988.aspx>

Answer or pose a question that is related to the content or starts a dialogue the unit wants to initiate with its audience¹².

Where there is room to elaborate and/or there is no linked article, give key information up front. Include “breaking,” “new,” or “just released” at the start of the message when relevant. Be clear, concise, and on point.

Use lists and videos. Magazine covers entice the reader with lists because they attract attention, and websites embed video clips for the same reason¹³.

Make content personal and local. If a general trend would be of interest to your audience, tie it to the University or unit. An article about the value of research in higher education might be linked to with a note about the value of University research. Celebrate the unique offerings of your unit, what the unit excels at, and the ways the unit helps the University excel. Let the reader see behind the curtain of your unit by sharing information that is interesting and positive but not widely known.

Don’t be afraid to go off point. If there is a major event at the University that is widely discussed, join the conversation in ways that match your unit tone.

Tailor the content to the medium. Twitter is a fast-moving medium. Plan to re-tweet the same event or topic more than once per day, over the course of several days. Vary the text of a post; create several different tweets from one article and avoid repeating tweets on a given day. Do not expect to re-use the same content within a given time period.¹⁴

Learn from others. Read and participate in social media listservs hosted by the campuses or UA. These links are in the resources section at the end of this document.

¹² <http://www.ragan.com/Main/Articles/47965.aspx>

¹³ <http://www.ragan.com/Main/Articles/47960.aspx>

¹⁴ <http://www.ragan.com/Main/Articles/47947.aspx>

Resources

Branding and identity standards

- UA
 - <http://www.uillinois.edu/our/identity/brand>
- Urbana
 - <http://identitystandards.illinois.edu/>
- Chicago
 - <http://omc.uic.edu/marketingtoolbox/brandguide/>
- Springfield
 - <http://www.uis.edu/creativeservices/standards/brandgraphics/>

Social media best practices

- Urbana
 - <http://publicaffairs.illinois.edu/resources/socialmediabestpractices.html>
- College of Medicine
 - http://chicago.medicine.uic.edu/UserFiles/Servers/Server_442934/File/OSA/Social%20Media%20Policy%20Guidelines%202012-2013%20revised%206-28-13.pdf
- Springfield
 - <http://www.uis.edu/sightsandsounds/social/>
 - <http://www.uis.edu/creativeservices/standards/socialmedia/>
 - <http://www.uis.edu/webservices/wp-content/uploads/sites/8/2013/02/6-Social-Media-Mistakes-to-Avoid1.pdf>

Use of University resources for political campaigning guidelines

- Urbana Campus Administrative Manual
 - <http://www.cam.illinois.edu/viii/VIII-1.3.htm>

Laws and policies governing conduct and ethics

- State officials and employees ethics act
 - <http://www.ilga.gov/legislation/ilcs/ilcs5.asp?ActID=2529&ChapterID=2>
- University handbook for good ethical practice
 - <http://www.ethics.uillinois.edu/cms/one.aspx?portalId=1109782&pageId=1120972>

Student records policies (including FERPA information)

- University Administration
 - <http://www.legal.uillinois.edu/ferpa>
- Urbana
 - http://admin.illinois.edu/policy/code/article3_part6_3-602.html
- Chicago
 - http://www.uic.edu/depts/oar/campus_policies/records_policy.html
- Springfield
 - <http://www.uis.edu/registration/records/studentrecordpolicy/>

Lists of social media accounts

- University Administration (Please contact our office to have your account added to this list)
 - <http://www.uillinois.edu/cms/One.aspx?portalId=1117531&pageId=1228326>
- Urbana
 - <http://illinois.edu/ds/socialMedia>
- Springfield
 - <http://www.uis.edu/sightsandsounds/social/>

Listservs and other informational or training resources

- University Administration
 - <https://illinois.edu/gm/subscribe/18913> to subscribe (a mediated venue; not a traditional listserv)
- Urbana
 - Send an email to socialmedia-request@lists.illinois.edu to subscribe to the campus social media information exchange list.
- Springfield
 - <http://blogs.uis.edu/isat/index.php/tag/social-media/>
 - <http://www.uis.edu/webservices/wp-content/uploads/sites/8/2013/02/How-to-Participate-in-Social-Media-to-Promote-UIS1.pdf>