

## YOU'LL "LIKE" THIS: DEVELOPING A PRESIDENTIAL SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGY

by Scott D. Miller and Marylouise Fennell

If you could find a cost-effective way to expand your visibility, matching messages precisely with targeted audiences while promoting your institutional brand, would you take advantage of it? Social media allow you to do this and more, fostering constituent relationships, expanding interest in your institution, and positioning your college or university as being ahead of the technology curve.

Yet only about 100 of some 3,500 college presidents nationwide actively use Twitter as a strategic communication device, with just a few more accessing Facebook. Approximately 700 regularly use LinkedIn, YouTube, blogs, and other tools. Those who do not employ social media are missing out on a host of opportunities to enhance and control their message while fostering the personal, interactive relationships that are at the core of all effective branding and marketing.

Our social media strategy at Bethany College focused on reinforcing the brand of a nationally ranked liberal arts college located in a rural section of West Virginia and further engaging an already loyal base of alumni and friends. In just five years, with minimal cost, start-up, and maintenance, we now have more than 1,100 followers on Twitter, with an additional 73 lists, over 1,800 LinkedIn connections, and 1,650 Facebook followers. This is in addition to visibility through regular e-cards, e-blasts, blogs, opinion pieces,

monthly presidential e-letters, a weekly online newsletter, and monthly online commentaries for *The Huffington Post* and a statewide business newspaper.

Bethany's direct primary list of 30,000 has been greatly expanded by secondary and tertiary audiences who receive institutional messages almost simultaneously with those on internal e-lists. For example, a recent post to 1,655 people on Facebook was quickly viewed by more than 7,000 followers as a result of the share function. Therefore, entire new audiences for the institution, previously unknown, have become instant constituents.

Here's what we learned in the process:

- **Social media quickly and effectively allow you to send disparate, relevant messages to diverse audiences in a matter of seconds.** As an active college president who is closely identified with the Bethany brand, Scott Miller controls eight different platforms from his desktop, iPhone, iPad or Netbook. Although followers of each site receive a different message, since many are on more than one site, all content supports the college's mission and the value of a liberal arts education and reinforces the branding message of Bethany. LinkedIn allows Scott to advertise position openings to colleagues and to repost college media releases often picked

- **Blogs.** Blogs represent the easiest way to create and deploy timely, fresh content. Yet in our experience, few higher education institutions have successfully harnessed blogs the way that the business sector has. Too often student bloggers run out of time and ideas, and their blogs end up languishing with infrequent and uninspired updates. Considering

the breadth of expertise and stories that exist across a typical college community, there should be no shortage of interesting, unique content. In particular, college marketers are missing the opportunity to tout their faculty's knowledge and expertise through smart, focused subject-matter blogs.

- **Social media.** When a college or university is producing compelling

content and highlighting unique stories, the college marketers must post that content across social media platforms where they can be shared and repurposed by engaged audiences. Admissions and alumni relations offices are typically well connected and represented in social media venues, but academics and student life are less visible in general. When the breadth

up as "tip sheets" by higher education and general circulation media, while Twitter allows him to reach alumni and students with more personal messages ("shout outs") for congratulations and condolences. Using the president's "public figure page" on Facebook, students, families, and alumni are encouraged to follow Scott's activities without a privacy invasion to the follower.

- **Social media also permit you to control the frequency and distribution of your message.** Electronic distribution services at nominal cost allow us to time-deliver messages to balance distribution. These might include campus news, reports, and interesting articles from outside organizations that reinforce the institution's message and image. In addition, by taking advantage of "dead times" in the news cycle, we can schedule messages to arrive when audiences have time to read and assimilate them. We can also ensure a high degree of frequency, so that key audiences receive a continuous flow of appropriate communications. Further, student interns in the president's office scan national media for outside news items of interest to target audiences. Several campus units also funnel information to the president's office for consideration; however, the president controls all messages that are posted.
- **In times of crisis, social media are essential in distributing general and timely alerts, messages, and updates instantly and comprehensively.** We've

discovered that many students, for example, prefer accessing social media to checking their campus email accounts.

Thus, social media reinforce the perception that the administration is focusing on communications 24/7. Since 2007, Scott has transitioned from email on desktop to texting on Blackberry and Netbook to iPad and iPhone more recently. We will admit that it took a while to set up templates for Bethany's weekly online newsletter, *The Old Main Journal*, and monthly *e-President's Letter*. It's also important to keep social media content fresh and concise. The unqualified success of this initiative, however, has far outweighed the time needed to create and implement it.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, when electricity was in its infancy, President and Mrs. Rutherford B. Hayes, among others, are said to have so feared this new technology that they asked their servants to turn the White House switches on and off. One day soon, we will find our early qualms about using social media to be equally unfounded. Like electricity, social media are here to stay, with virtually unlimited applications for serving our institutions and target audiences. We urge you and your colleagues to harness this vast potential.

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