Using social media
to build community support/visibility/trust

The exploding use of social media in the past few years leaves few options for schools and school districts. Given the number of students, parents and others using social media, chances are very good your school already has a social media presence. If that presence is controlled by others, it may be projecting an image of your organization that is the opposite of what you want it to be.

A recent poll shows 80 percent of members of most communities have Internet access, 55 percent have used Facebook, 20 percent have used LinkedIn, and nearly one in five have used YouTube. Fifty eight percent of all people and 82 percent of parents have used the Web to get information about their schools. Interestingly, 40% of people over the age of 60 have used Facebook in the past year.

These figures make it obvious that electronic and social media should be an integral part of an effective school communications program. At the same time, failing to use social media correctly can earn more enemies than friends. Like any communication that lends itself to friendly communication, social media can build trust or erode confidence.

Plan before you act.

The biggest mistake made by those entering the world of social media is to treat it like a publication. Social media is not the place to tell people “what they ought to know” or “sell” anything. Communicating effectively using social media is an exercise in entering and building a social circle. To create good content for social media you have to:

• Pretend you’re at a friendly gathering.
• Engage in conversations rather than imparting information, promoting programs or bragging about successes.

As in any social setting, there is a whole set of rules that dictate how you speak to others, what you post, how much and how often you speak and what is socially acceptable to speak about. For example, it is considered rude to have too many promotions on your pages or in your feeds. Just as constantly talking about yourself in real life drives people away, too much promotion in social media comes off as selfish and arrogant.

That doesn’t mean you can’t use social media to promote your schools, but it does mean you need to be creative. You have to weave marketing messages into interesting discussions, contests, games, videos or other quality content that engages your fan base and causes it to grow. The ultimate goal is to make your content interactive and so good that people want to share it with their network of friends.

Before launching any social media campaign, find out who uses social media, who you want to reach, which social media is most apt to reach each group, how you will make your social media into a positive force for your school and how you will measure results.
Content is king. Think about the message you want to convey and what could go wrong. Once your words are out there they will take on a life of their own. If others grab them and forward them, there is no way you will ever get them back. Great content can make you a desired friend. An unfortunate use of words can provide great fun for pranksters who add words and alter messages.

Establish multiple ways to promote use of your social media sites. Include information and create links in all other communications including newsletters, Web sites, official letterhead, e-mail and on other social media locations.

**Ideas for using social media to enhance communications**

- Give people an opportunity to ask questions or join a discussion on a topic that is important to your community or a select group of the community. Guide the conversation by assigning an administrator or other staff member to launch the conversation. Establish a friendly, inviting tone, keep track of the dialogue and supply facts where needed.
- Get input on critical decisions such as budget reductions, policies, and potential finance measures.
- Make administrators and teachers available for conversations with parents, students and other community members.
- Use social media, such as Twitter, for continual updates during a crisis. Chances are students who have cell phones will put out plenty of information this way, so it is to your benefit to establish an administrator or another staff member as the source for accurate information when there is a problem or crisis. Continual “tweets” giving facts about the situation can allay fears; debunk rumor and surmise, and help control information about the situation.
- Place highly creative student projects on appropriate social media sites.
- Create your own “surge” to events through texting or tweeting the desired audience and creating excitement around what is happening.
- Establish a school fan page on Facebook.
- Continually follow what others are saying to identify subjects of great interest, unrest, and incorrect information.
- Maintain! Maintain! Maintain! Old content turns people away, and it is very hard to get them back. Worse still, lack of vigilance can open the door for negative take-over of your content or pranksters turning you into the community joke. If you can’t maintain a social media site, it is best not to start one.

**Tips for effective use of Facebook**

- Start with a picture. It attracts people and keeps them on your site. High interest videos can also contribute greatly to sustained interest in the page. A photo that links to video is an effective way to generate traffic and tell your story.
- Ask questions that prompt participation.
- Stay online. Most companies who study responsiveness to social media find it takes at least five to 10 posts a day to keep people interested in your postings.
- Highlight an interesting quote to draw attention and generate conversation.
- Content is everything. Make sure content is valuable to those who visit and hopefully participate in your Facebook page.
- Readability makes a big difference in participation. Some experts in generating and keeping social media traffic say the lower the grade level of the writing, the higher the participation.

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Have provocative content and promote debates. Although this may be uncomfortable for schools and school districts, it is an important element that keeps people coming back to a Facebook page.

Include personal information. The whole point of social media is to build friends. To do that, those who are controlling the Facebook page need to reveal some personal things about themselves or other district leaders, things that help followers see them as real people. This might be books you are reading, number of children you have, your personal opinions on recent research, or anything else that helps people see you as someone who is real.

Drive traffic to your page through all other communications devices.

Track “likes” and “dislikes”. The views of those who are participating in the page and their opinions or comments can provide valuable input.

**Tips for effective use of Twitter**

If parents, news media and others know you will be using Twitter in the event of an emergency, this can be a very valuable tool for providing constant, accurate information about what is happening. If it is an emergency involving secondary students, students will undoubtedly be sending photos and messages from the scene. If you want to establish yourself as the accurate source of information, you need to establish a presence on social media such as Twitter and have people in the habit of turning to you as their main source of information.

Constant response is vital to the success of Twitter. The idea is to generate conversation, so someone will be continually watching for “tweets” and responding to them.

The most effective use of Twitter occurs when you succeed in turning others into collaborators. This can be to solve problems, to give you information they have, or anything else that generates interest and keeps the conversation flowing.

Generate traffic by using other communication media to invite people to join the conversation on Twitter.

Constantly ask for opinions. For example, when you are showing photos of an event, ask others to tweet what they think of what they are seeing.

**Build a network of supporters**

Establish trust by demonstrating your responsiveness. Emulate corporate CEOs and celebrities who invite customers and fans to use Twitter, Facebook and other social media outlets to pose questions which they quickly answer. A superintendent or principal who makes herself or himself available in this way and effectively uses the medium chosen, will be seen as open, honest and trustworthy. A human resources director who provides information about hiring in the district, application processes and advantages of working in the district can provide a positive relationship with future staff members. A curriculum director who has conversations with parents about the advantages of the new approach to teaching math may circumvent negative reactions to the program. The communications director who keeps key communicators “in the know”, consults with them in their areas of expertise, and immediately responds to their “tweeted” questions will have a powerful communications force working throughout the community.

**The bottom line**

A successful social media campaign requires creativity, a clear message, diligence, and timing, including making a splash at the right time.
properly planned and executed, it can reach vital audiences, create trust and engage people in an effective way. When poorly executed, it can backfire and bring more harm than good. If you are going to communicate using social media, do it right.

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