

An Exploration of Digital Storytelling: SNC Building Wars

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Description

Our project, SNC Building Wars, gave St. Norbert College community members the chance to vote for their favorite on-campus buildings through a fun, bracket-style competition. Using Twitter as our chosen platform, we created a March Madness inspired bracket that pitted 32 buildings from around St. Norbert's campus against each other. To mimic March Madness' format, we split the competition up into five distinct rounds, all of which featured multiple 24-hour, two-item Twitter Polls that audience members used to vote for their preferred buildings. Because polls can become redundant over time, we decided to give each building a different personality/"opening statement" as a way to add humor and interest to our digital story. These humorous taglines were placed under pictures of each building, which were posted alongside corresponding polls during the first and second rounds of the competition. As with a traditional bracket competition, the number of buildings decreased as the rounds progressed. SNC Building Wars remained active until its final round, when two buildings were pitted against each other, and the winner was chosen by the page's followers. On a whole, the competition lasted about a month - the first round began on March 28, and the fifth round concluded on April 21. We kept SNC Building Wars active between rounds by posting updates about upcoming rounds, shouting out other classmates' projects, and posting supplementary media.

When we first started SNC Building Wars, our goal was to attract a healthy number of followers that engaged consistently with our polls and other posts. We ended up with 79 followers, two-thirds of which regularly voted in our polls (the highest-performing poll received 62 votes). Our follower count was drastically less than the number of Twitter users we were following (473), something we did not guess would happen. We anticipated a good amount of

SNC students would follow SNC Building Wars back if they received a follow from the account, but this was not the case - we started with an extremely low amount of followers, and these small numbers were admittedly disheartening. Overtime, though, SNC Building Wars' following gradually increased, and the page gained a solid number of followers by the time the competition ended.

Another aspect of engagement we expected better results from at the beginning of our project was audience interaction; we wanted people to get involved in the competition by liking, retweeting, and replying to our tweets, and we hoped our followers would become competitively invested in the SNC Building Wars bracket like basketball fans become invested in March Madness brackets, but we did not have much luck with this. In the end, SNC Building Wars did not receive large amounts of audience competition and participation like we initially wanted, but our main goals were reached: audience members interacted with the competition's polls consistently, and an on-campus building was eventually crowned a winner by SNC's community.

Inspiration

Our original idea for this project involved creating separate Twitter profiles for SNC's on-campus buildings, so that each building could interact with its neighbors through funny, competitive exchanges. This idea was inspired by humorous Twitter rivalries that often arise between popular brands, such as McDonald's Twitter "feud" with Wendy's back in 2017 (the latter bashed the former for only using fresh beef "most of the time") (May, 2017). With this in mind, we made a list of the buildings we wanted to feature, but soon realized we would have to make too many Twitter accounts if our initial idea was to be effective. After brainstorming different options, we decided to connect our on-campus buildings idea to March Madness (a big

source of inspiration), and eventually formed SNC Building Wars. As mentioned, we created a bracket based off of those used during March Madness, gave each building a different personality through opening statements, and allowed our followers to continuously vote on the fate of the buildings until there was only one winner. Our idea to assign each building a personality was inspired by the popular Twitter page Thoughts of Dog, which, as its title suggests, showcases the hilarious and cute thoughts of a dog throughout the day. We tried to incorporate that same kind of humor into our own project, and believe this addition made our project stand out among other bracket-style competitions.

That being said, we ultimately used the popular bracket format to our advantage. Because bracket-style competitions are fairly common on social media, especially around March Madness season, we figured SNC Building Wars would be easy for audience members to understand and engage with - in other words, it was a piece of popular culture they already knew how to navigate. When deciding the best method to carry out the assignment, our group knew we wanted a lot of engagement associated with our project, specifically from students at St. Norbert College. Knowing how quickly pages can go viral on Twitter, we chose that platform to boost our chances of obtaining valuable audience participation. Additionally, because polls are something Twitter users are familiar with, we thought this would be a great way to let our followers decide which buildings in the bracket should move on (we also wanted to use Twitter polls simply because we rarely get the chance to utilize the feature in our everyday lives, and we wanted to test it out). The fact that the polls were anonymous worked in our favor, as people who voted a certain way may have been too embarrassed to do so if they were identified. In the end, the polls illustrated a clear picture of what people actually believed were the best and worst

buildings on campus, and were just plain fun to analyze as the competition progressed - it was rewarding to see the number of voters grow during each round.

Digital Storytelling

Digital storytelling was represented within our project through multiple digital storytelling principles. One principle our Twitter page utilized was serial structure, which refers to stories that are told in small, interconnected pieces, rather than one large piece. SNC Building Wars demonstrated serial structure through the multitude of tweets that were required to complete the competition. In other words, it wouldn't have been possible to effectively exhaust the bracket without posting many different tweets and polls - for this reason, we carried on the competition for several weeks to lengthen the story and build anticipation among our followers and voters. Another principle of digital storytelling our project used was personal presence, which refers to a narrative's unique "voice." We created a voice for the 32 buildings involved with SNC Building Wars by posting photos/captions on Twitter that helped describe each building in a first-person style. The use of these captioned photos not only gave the page a funnier perspective, but also allowed voters to relate and connect to the page in a deeper way, because the captions typically reflected the thoughts and opinions SNC community members have about on-campus buildings (for example, the photo describing Boyle Hall mentioned the building's shifting temperatures, something students and faculty poke fun at frequently).

Unsurprisingly, the principle of social frameworks was also evident in SNC Building Wars. Social framework refers to the fact that information can be easily spread and passed around through social media. Because we used Twitter, voters had the option to spread our page through the retweet and direct message features included with the app. These features allowed

voters to build the network we wanted in order to get engagement from our audience. The final digital storytelling principle we utilized throughout our project was platform affordances. This principle, while simple, points out the important fact that stories can be produced in several different ways/can be published on several different platforms. We applied platform affordances through our use of polls, images, and a video on Twitter. Using different pieces of media created a more entertaining story that spread our message in the best way possible.

Another aspect of digital storytelling our project dependent on greatly was the idea of participatory culture. Participatory culture, according to Humphreys, “means that audiences participate not only in consuming cultural products but also in producing them” (2016, p. 66). Not only were our followers and non-followers viewing content, they participated in creating the content by voting in the polls. This is similar to Jason Mraz asking others to help formulate a music video. By utilizing participatory culture, our story was also dependent on co-creation. As discussed in class and by Humphreys, co-creation occurs “when the audience becomes especially active and begins to produce things of value” (p. 64). While our audience never actually created any content, they did largely contribute in our creation of content. For example, we produced a video to highlight the buildings no longer in the bracket, and while we created the video, we could not have done so without Twitter users’ participation in the polls. Much like a Mad Lib, the story could not be completed without filling in the blanks. Overall, participation was crucial to our project.

When it came to the inclusion of traditional aspects of narrative, we incorporated characters, perspective/ point of view, and conflict into SNC Building Wars. As mentioned, we created funny captions for each building that ultimately made the buildings come across as

distinct characters. By creating these “characters,” we hopefully made audience members feel like the buildings were actually competing against each other, as opposed to feeling like a random person in charge of a Twitter account was asking for people to vote for buildings. The humorous building profiles also fostered an engaging point of view, since they were written in first-person prose. Obviously, conflict was evident in SNC Building Wars, because buildings were pitted against each other for the winning title.

The final aspect of digital storytelling we incorporated into our project was permission marketing, which is a form of social media marketing that occurs when users voluntarily subscribe to digital content (a prime example of this is subscribing to an email list). SNC Building Wars’ followers engaged in permission marketing when they decided to follow the page and interact with its posts - they were not paid or forced to follow our project, and did so at their own leisure.

Engaging Audiences

As with many digital storytelling projects, no digital platform is effective without an audience. SNC Building Wars was no different. In the beginning, we began following as many profiles on Twitter as we could in order to first build our audience. Primarily, we focused on following individuals who were associated with St. Norbert College, whether it was a student, staff/faculty, or a group from campus. More specifically, we looked to attract an audience who was already interested in sports. Because our project was based off March Madness, it felt more appropriate to pursue an audience who would likely understand what a bracket challenge was like. One St. Norbert sports related page we followed was the SNC Sports Section, who proved beneficial in the promotion of our own page and an increase audience engagement.

The SNC Sports Section Twitter page is run by our own Addy Bink, who shared a number of our tweets to the Sports Section followers. Addy would retweet the polls involving the Mulva Family Fitness Center to draw attention to them. Surprisingly, the Fitness Center went on to ‘win’ the building wars. On average, the tweets retweeted by the Sports Section garnered the most votes in each round. This interaction with the Sports Section increased the size of our audience, increasing the amount of audience engagement. We did a similar partnership with best campus doggo (@campusdogz). We shared some of their polls and they would do the same with some of ours. Doing so allowed us to benefit from each other’s audiences. To further increase our audience, we pitched the idea to create a shared Google Doc with class in order to follow other digital storytelling projects and vice versa. It did not result in the addition of many new followers, but it allowed us to see what other groups were doing. We did gain a number of followers by posting in a private Facebook page, Saint Norbert’s 10th Circle of Hell, asking for the members to follow and participate in our project. This gave us about 15 new followers. For one last chance at followers, Addy wrote about our project in an article about other March Madness brackets. We believe we gained no new followers because of this.

Once we acquired an audience, our project began to take off. To allow for audience engagement, we created polls for our followers to vote with. For each round, we would post a poll with the buildings in each. These polls would be open for one day to allow followers to participate. The building that won each round would move into the next round. Only the building with the most votes would move on to the next round. This is how we kept our audiences engaged - they selected which buildings moved on, not us. We only had one interaction with a follower, Paul Ballard, who commented to let us know “the committee [did] a disservice to both

buildings as the [sic] should both be #1 and not a first round match up.” Other than this interaction, most of our audience engagement was from the polls.

Experiential Learning

Before embarking on this project, the majority of our group had predominantly engaged with social media in the personal sphere, meaning we didn’t have much experience strategizing for engagement on Twitter (we were used to reaching a smaller, friend-based audiences). Because of this, fostering meaningful audience engagement for SNC Building Wars - an integral part of the poll-based competition - took some trial and error, and ultimately taught us important lessons. First, we learned following a large quantity of people *before* publishing content for them to view on our Twitter profile was not the most effective way to gain a following. At the time of our first big following spree, SNC Building Wars had not begun yet - besides the vague promise of an upcoming competition involving on-campus buildings, individuals had little to no incentive to follow the page back. If these same users were greeted with humorous building profiles and even a few polls to participate in during their first time engaging with SNC Building Wars, we believe they would have been more likely to follow-back. In hindsight, the project should have been more established before we reached out to prospective audience members.

Another engagement-related insight we gained over the course of this project was that in-person connections matter more than we thought they would when working on a digital space - in other words, it’s not what you know, it’s who you know. After reflecting on our attempts at audience engagement, it is clear our most successful attempts involved some degree of in-person networking. For example, our group’s personal connection to Addy, who has administrative access to the SNC Sports Section Twitter page, allowed SNC Building Wars to reach a much

larger audience than it would have otherwise (as mentioned, Addy frequently re-tweeted polls/content). Additionally, some of our most active followers were friends and individuals we talked about the project to in real-life, as opposed to individuals whom we didn't have a personal connection with and/or those who only heard about the project via social media. It is easy to forget the importance of in-person relationships when it comes to the digital world, but this project showed us just how necessary they still are.

This project also made us aware of how time consuming fostering an online following from the ground-up is. For a social media campaign to be truly successful, it requires constant attention, brainstorming, and creativity. Because of the sheer amount of content and stimulus available to social media users at any given time of the day, it is easy for posts to become lost, and it is just as easy for users to become bored of content. These are challenges SNC Building Wars faced, and while they were disheartening at times, they ultimately taught our group another helpful lesson: successful social media campaigns must feature a variety of different mediums if they are to remain interesting for audience members. After our first few posts didn't receive the amount of engagement we initially hoped for, we quickly realized our Twitter page needed to include more than text-based posts and polls. As the competition progressed, we made an effort to post more images and even made a video "remembering" the buildings that had failed to move on (unsurprisingly, this unique and comical video received more engagement than the majority of our other non-poll posts). It was exciting to see our creativity pay off, and motivated us to continue the trend until the end of the project.

Conclusion

Overall, this project was enjoyable and allowed us to better understand the use and impact of digital storytelling. The Twitter page itself gave us a glimpse into the buildings the St.

Norbert community appreciates, as well as those less adored. Going forward, there is little to no future for SNC Building Wars. This is for two interconnected reasons: first, there are no other buildings we could have included. Second, we are all juniors and we will likely not be on campus the next time a new building is constructed. There are, of course, alternatives if we wanted to make this an annual event, such as Worst Building or a reconfiguration of the bracket. Regardless, we feel this was an entertaining project for not only us, but those who participated in the bracket as well.

References

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