

# SOCIAL MEDIA: BEST PRACTICES FOR COLLEGE ADMISSIONS PROFESSIONALS

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## INTRODUCTION

As a university or college, admission professionals are responsible for the crucial task of recruiting and communicating with prospective and current students. The “number of undergraduate college enrollment has declined by 6.5% within the past two years,” which can be partially credited to the pandemic (NSC Research Center, 2021). This decrease in overall enrollment threatens higher institutions’ future success and unveils a need for the best social media marketing strategies. The solution to increasing the enrollment numbers is to reach prospective students and stay active with current students. Part of connecting with students is using social media since “84% of young adults ages 18-29 use social media” (Pew Research Center, 2021). In addition to the personal use of young adults, “prospective college students comprise a significant portion of social media users with 75% reporting researching potential college choices through institutions’ social media platforms” (Benedict, Leach, Winn & Baker, 2016). The high percentage of Gen Z on social media and the high rate of researching colleges through platforms contribute to universities and colleges’ overarching need to know the best marketing and business strategies to excel their profile on the internet.

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## BACKGROUND: SOCIAL MEDIA ON THE RISE IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

### IMPORTANCE

The digital world is ever-changing and growing, and to be competitive, there needs to be a strategy to maintain channels effectively. Social media is useful in influencing students' college choices (Turner, M. L., 2017).

The influence of social media on students' decision-making process is rising. This relates to students seeking out specific platforms for different needs. For instance, Instagram shows what campus life and culture look like vs. Facebook and Twitter are great for answering students' questions (Turner, M. L., 2017).

The value of social media extends beyond having a presence; it is all in how universities use social media (Benedict, Leach, Winn & Baker, 2016).

It's important to know what resources should be used and where to disperse them.

Students have been found to start, stop, and restart across multiple channels. Institutions need to be prepared for this by being confident that all their platforms will have enough variety, information, and direction. Having the resources and knowledge to stay on top of which platforms yield the best results is a big part of today's challenge (Turner, M. L., 2017).



### ADVANTAGES

1. Social media tools help build both relationships and reputation. Immediacy is another advantage noted by institutions, as there is an interactive, informal dynamic that can be interpersonal or group communication (Kelleher & Sweetser, 2012).

2. The compatibility between user and audience on social media is more cost-effective than other marketing strategies. A website, although needed for institutions, is cost-heavy with maintenance, additions, and expansions. With the addition of social media, there becomes less strain on updating audience members on the website since platforms can obtain that duty.

3. Most platforms are user-friendly or relatively simple to learn how to use for less digitally skilled communicators. Content can be repurposed and distributed to multiple channels and reach wider audiences than old marketing practices like blogs, websites, and emails.

4. Several social media tools allow marketing integration to be quick and easy (Kelleher & Sweetser, 2012).



### OPPORTUNITIES

The expansion of recruiting use is a major opportunity. Educational institutions should become familiar with how prospective students integrate social media into their decision-making processes to incorporate personalized campaigns into recruiting strategies successfully (Benedict, Leach, Winn & Baker, 2016). Themes from a study showed that institutions are utilizing e-recruiting, recruiting online, and how it is essential to serve the informational needs of prospective students through these channels. The social network campaign conducted by Fagerström & Ghinea found that one way of serving these needs was by encouraging potential students to join Facebook groups dedicated to their programs of interest. The overall goal for recruitment through social media is to increase enrollment and guide students to make informed decisions (Benedict, Leach, Winn & Baker, 2016).

In the early stages of the decision-making process, students seek factual, professional material outside of social media but turn towards social media for final enrollment choices, emphasizing how a social media marketing strategy can make a difference.

Another opportunity is that social media spreads necessary news to a mass audience, making it another way for potential students to become familiar with the institution (Benedict, Leach, Winn & Baker, 2016). In addition, some universities relate social media use with emotional ties to their institutions. With these emotional connections, they claim that there is an improvement in the higher education experience for prospective students (Benedict, Leach, Winn & Baker, 2016).



## BACKGROUND: SOCIAL MEDIA DEVELOPMENTS

### TWITTER

Twitter is becoming less widely used for students and soon institutions. Though, much research draws on Twitter and its relation to institutions' marketing strategies. The platform is generally used to carry out conversations (Belanger, C. H., Bali, S., & Longden, B., 2014). Twitter stresses textual stimuli compared to other platforms. Although emphasizing text can provide the information sought out by users, it requires a more considerable amount of cognitive effort compared to visually dominant platforms (Arceneaux & Dinu, 2018). A study done by Arceneaux and Dinu found that the heavy text of Twitter was less effective in terms of information recall (Arceneaux & Dinu, 2018).

### FACEBOOK

At the start, Facebook was a social media site for college students, but the platform has since 'aged up' in which it is seen as outdated by traditionally aged college students (Shields, A. B., & Peruta, A., 2019). Despite its "outdatedness," Facebook is still the most used platform for young adults (compared to Instagram and Twitter). Image-driven platforms like Facebook tend to attract current and prospective students. Besides the demographic of Facebook, the platform has also transitioned from organic content to a pay-to-play model for institutions. Although wider audiences can still reach highly engaged content, institutions need to generate more paid posts to target consumers' news feeds (Shields, A. B., & Peruta, A., 2019).

### INSTAGRAM

The style of Instagram is dominated by visual stimuli rather than text stimuli. Although text is typically added to Instagram posts, the essence of Instagram is visual. One study conducted had found the visually dominant platform of Instagram to be more effective in terms of information recall (Arceneaux & Dinu, 2018). St. Lawrence University's social media manager states that her top priority is Instagram followed by Facebook and Twitter (Turner, M. L., 2017).

Since more traditionally-aged college students are transitioning to Instagram, it's crucial for universities to not only have an Instagram page, but to have an active one. Studies have shown that a page with no recent activity gives students the impression that the school is irrelevant, ordinary, and has no current events (Shields, A. B., & Peruta, A., 2019).

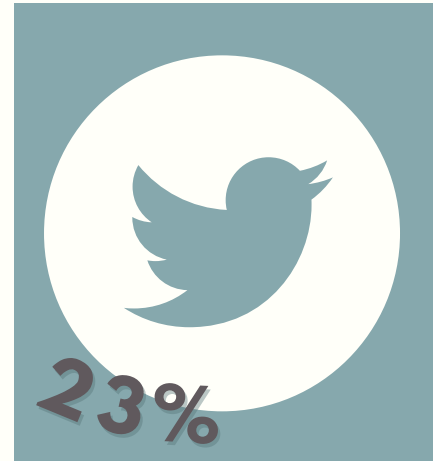
The atmosphere on Twitter is generally more honest in feedback. The engagement between brands and consumers allows for consumers to question and promote brands actively. This cycle of engagement on Twitter has suggested that a brand's performance on Twitter can predict future outcomes on other platforms (Rutter, R., Roper, S., & Lettice, F., 2016).

Unlike Twitter, Facebook allows users to have a detailed personal profile which makes categorizing the individual into a specific group easier. This is important for institutions when looking at their followers' demographic because it allows them to see what audience they should be targeting (Belanger, C. H., Bali, S., & Longden, B., 2014).

Maintaining a credible and reliable Facebook page for an institution provides a way for current and prospective students to identify the official university websites and other official accounts (Kelleher, T., & Sweetser, K., 2012). Facebook is often used for university-initiated postings related to campus/student news and events (Belanger, C. H., Bali, S., & Longden, B., 2014).

Instagram is rising to popularity among students as well as institutions. With the platform being visually dominant and captions being light, institutions can show how great their campus is through photos and videos. The platform is projected to grow compared to other media sites because it actively engages users. However, Instagram is more difficult for large-scale social media plans, and for institutions to be successful on the platform, they have to learn how to structure the visual nature of their content.

 Percentages of US Adults on each platform (Pew Research Center, 2021)



## SOLUTION A: GROWN ONLINE COMMUNITIES

### BUILD A HIGH REPUTATION

A high reputation has a more substantial impact on fan size, meaning followers, than university size. University reputation is based on the yearly 'Times Higher Education Ranking,' which considers the teaching, international outlook, and industry income of a school. Universities with higher scores have a high reputation. University size is how many students are enrolled. Additionally, the longer a university is engaged with Facebook and other platforms, the more fans it attracts. For Facebook, the number of likes, shares, and comments on postings can be improved by having longer postings (Brech, F. M., Messer, U., Vander Schee, B. A., Rauschnabel, P. A., & Ivens, B. S., 2017).

A high reputation drives more likes on a university's Facebook. So, although a university may be small in size (private institutions), if the reputation is high, they will have more fans than a large university (public) who may not have a great reputation. However, it is important to note that there can be adverse effects to universities with a strong reputation having more fans on Facebook. This negative effect is due to the uncertainty of individual fan engagement when there is a large following. However, universities can combat this by the frequency of postings. Finding the balance of frequency is critical as too many or too few updates can lead to a decrease in fan engagement, regardless of reputation status (Brech, F. M., Messer, U., Vander Schee, B. A., Rauschnabel, P. A., & Ivens, B. S., 2017).

### UTILIZE BEING ACTIVE ON MULTIPLE SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

In 2014, it was found that the “top 30% of universities are not only being active on social media, but also emphasizing high-quality posts” (Belanger, C. H., Bali, S., & Longden, B., 2014). Universities are estimated to utilize at least three social media platforms for their official institutional accounts. Having multiple platforms in use makes it crucial to have high-quality posts to encourage social interaction with various users. Those who do both, multiple social platforms and high-quality content, are the leaders in the social media marketing race (Belanger, C. H., Bali, S., & Longden, B., 2014).

Before adopting a social media presence across multiple platforms, reliable resources must be allocated towards a strategy.

Higher institutions must take an active stance to be successful in their social media marketing. There is no value to having a social media presence with no activity. Rather, this is detrimental to the institutions' success on social media. For instance, an Instagram with no activity within the past year can give current and prospective students the impression that the institution is irrelevant.

Those with multiple platforms sometimes have additional pages/profiles per platform that emphasize various aspects or departments of the school. However, this strategy works only if each page/profile on each platform stays active. Students who are more engaged in their institutions' social media sites will also have more access to valuable resources, which will lead to an even higher perception of relationship quality between student and university (Clark, M., Fine, M. B., & Scheuer, C. L., 2017).

### MAINTAIN A POSITIVE RELATIONSHIP WITH STUDENTS ONLINE

To maintain a positive relationship online with students depends on relationships satisfaction, trust, and commitment (Clark, M., Fine, M. B., & Scheuer, C. L., 2017). To have high relationship satisfaction, universities on social media must treat students as the customers and education as the service or product offered. When relationship satisfaction is achieved, there is a decrease in student termination and an increase in retention. Trust can be fostered through consistent posting, transparency, and helpfulness on social media. Universities can gain trust by communicating to prospective students directly through the social media platform.

Universities can commit by communicating quickly, meaningfully, and leading interaction. Interaction extends beyond the perceived commitment of the university; the universities that interact more with their followers have a higher student recruitment performance than those universities that fail (Rutter, R., Roper, S., & Lettice, F., 2016).

## SOLUTION B: INCREASE ENGAGEMENT AND INTERACTION

### CORRECTLY ALLOCATE CONTENT FOR EACH PLATFORM

Current students are commenting on Twitter more than Facebook. This is because Twitter provides immediate and rapid information and responses than Facebook or Instagram. Prospective students use Facebook to seek information from an institution more than any other platform (Belanger, C. H., Bali, S., & Longden, B., 2014). The order for which platform prospective students seek out more for helping decide the institution they would attend is (in order) Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.

As far as each platform's content, Facebook is ideal for descriptions or more detailed information, whereas Instagram is primarily for showing the campus lifestyle and culture. Instagram is on an upward path to being the next popular site for prospective and current students, as the newer generations are more visually dominated in their needs (Shields, A. B., & Peruta, A., 2019). Twitter and Facebook are sought out when students need to ask questions. Facebook is commonly used to inform, engage, and attract prospective and current students (Turner, M. L., 2017). The optimal number of posts for universities is "three tweets per day on Twitter, two posts per day on Facebook, and at least 1.5 posts per day for Instagram" (Clark, M., Fine, M. B., & Scheuer, C. L., 2017).

### CREATE SYNERGY BETWEEN SOCIAL MEDIA CHANNELS

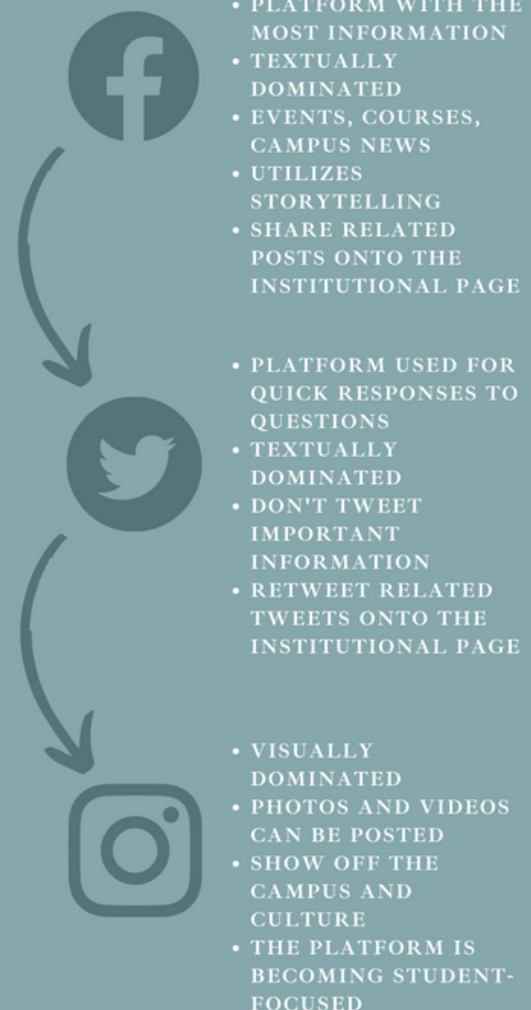
Synergy or flow can be created between platforms across multiple channels if there is a balanced amount of variance (Rutter, R., Roper, S., & Lettice, F., 2016). However, too much variance can lead to messages creating chaos or contradiction across channels. Although the way content is presented should vary per platform, changing the content's message per platform can mess up the marketing plan. The most common way this occurs is through conversations on other related institutional accounts, for instance, different departments profiles. However, a simple way of combating this potential issue is by sharing or retweeting posts onto the official institutional account (Clark, M., Fine, M. B., & Scheuer, C. L., 2017).

### HAVE AN AWARENESS OF THE INSTITUTION TYPE AND ITS EFFECT ON SOCIAL MEDIA PRESENCE

The size of a university profile and number of followers positively impact the absolute number of likes, shares, and comments but decreases individual engagement. Therefore, it is essential for social media marketing strategies to not rely on the number of followers predicting the effectiveness of a page (Brech, F. M., Messer, U., Vander Schee, B. A., Rauschnabel, P. A., & Ivens, B. S., 2017). Bigger universities, meaning the number of enrolled students, can have a large following if they also have a high reputation.

However, it is difficult to achieve both a large following and a high reputation at a larger university because the relationships between the institution and followers become weaker the more significant the following becomes. The relationship becomes weaker because there is a substantial difference between those connected to the university (people enrolled) and those who admire the university for artificial purposes (creating a better image of themselves on social media) (Brech, F. M., Messer, U., Vander Schee, B. A., Rauschnabel, P. A., & Ivens, B. S., 2017).

### ←-----→ WHAT THE FLOW BETWEEN PLATFORMS LOOKS LIKE



## SOLUTION C: BRANDING YOUR INSTITUTION ON SOCIAL MEDIA

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### TREAT YOUR AUDIENCE AS CUSTOMERS AND YOUR INSTITUTION AS A SERVICE

- HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS HAVE MULTIPLE STAKEHOLDERS AND ARE A SERVICE INDUSTRY
  - INSTITUTIONS MEDIA CHANNELS SHOULD COMMUNICATE A SENSE OF BELONGING
  - CREATE A DISTINCT BRAND WITH VALUES, A MISSION, SMART GOALS, AND A TARGET MARKET TO HAVE A COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE
  - HIGH-QUALITY CONTENT AND INTERACTION IS KEY TO INCREASING BRAND AWARENESS

### UNDERSTAND HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS ARE A CORPORATE BRAND

### INCORPORATE STORYTELLING FOR THE VALUES OF THE INSTITUTION

### EMOTIONAL BRANDING CAN DIFFERENTIATE YOU FROM THE COMPETITION

- PROVIDE AUTHENTIC INSIGHTS INTO THE UNIVERSITY BY LEAVING THE TRADITIONAL OR FUNCTIONAL VALUES ON THE INSTITUTIONAL WEBSITE
  - SHARE PERSONAL STORIES OF STUDENTS
  - SHARE SUCCESSES OF THE UNIVERSITY'S SPORTS TEAMS
  - SHARE FACULTY AND STAFF EXPERIENCES AT THE UNIVERSITY



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