

Learning to Fail.

5 rules for using social media in higher education

David Allen

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*For Kat, for putting up with my late night typing sessions, and for
my King Charles Spaniel Louie, for being one of the most
Instagrammed dogs in history.*

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Rule 1. Plan.

“In preparing for battle I have always found that plans are useless, but planning is indispensable.” - Dwight D. Eisenhower

As obnoxious as it probably is to start a book about social media with a quote from a military leader, particularly one to which I feel morally ambiguous about at best, it is nevertheless a fairly apt philosophy to attach to social media planning.

I know, I know, I just shuddered inside too.

But still, having attended dozens of ‘social media’ events like, although not thankfully this [one](#)¹, and met hundreds of self-professed social media consultants, gurus, ninjas, evangelists, and demigods, the same pseudo-knowing statement is always echoed:

‘A social media plan is vital.’

Yet, except it isn’t really. Well, let me clarify, it is and it isn’t.

“Social media is quite spontaneous, so you need to allow room for things that may just develop on the day,” says Birmingham City University’s Social Media Officer, Sundip Gill. “So much of my time is spent researching; being at a university there are always quite a lot of events, you just have to see what comes up every day. You definitely have to be flexible. You can’t keep to a strict schedule. It just doesn’t work like that; you have to be flexible and spontaneous.

“Last week the weather was really nice, I took some photos with my SLR camera of Eastside and of the new Curzon building, and shared it online. The engagement rate on Facebook especially was

¹<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=itvvFfeLh84>

great, with 350 likes, and a dozen shares, and it's not something that I'd planned in my schedule. It was a nice day, I had my camera, if I posted anything else it might not have worked so well."

In some ways, a lot of this book is probably an insight into the to-ing and fro-ing in my own mind over how useful formalised social media plans are. Many of the people I speak to, are very much for it. Yet keeping a vast spreadsheet for everything you tweet for the next 12 months, as some people do, seems as absurd as keeping a database of your upcoming conversations for the next year. Because the thing many marketers don't really 'get' about once geeky little social media tools, is that they're essentially one big pub (another analogy is that of a playground, but pubs are essentially playgrounds with beer anyway).

Stay with me.

Pub conversations might be jokey, argumentative, earnest, extreme - many of the synonyms we associate with our friends social posts on a daily basis. Whilst professionally, how many have heard about (or gained) new work opportunities or gained sales leads over drinks? Oh and it's a largely misogynistic space dominated by men, but that's another conversation.

Now, imagine walking into a crowded pub and bellowing 'Our research ensures you'll be top of the world to succeed! #innovation'.

You'd look an idiot, or be ignored entirely.

Or, to put it in terms many marketeers will understand, your core message would not resonate with the target audience.

"Generally we find there's a lack of understanding of different audiences and their information needs," says Ellie Lovell, Head of Content Strategy and Social Media Planning at Pickle Jar Communications, a marketing agency that specialises in the higher education sector.

"Often, there will be a tendency to publish institutional information and news on online channels, but not necessarily thinking about

the varied audiences who will be receiving it or whether that's the information they want and need. So the biggest problems tend to be around basic content marketing principles of creating useful and engaging information for specific audiences – as opposed to just communicating what the institution wants to get across to its audiences."

So what should you do instead then? Well perhaps one approach might be to walk into said pub, with a rough idea of who you'd like to speak to, and simply have a conversation. For a start, that means understanding the behavioural culture of the bar they're in (yes I'm going to push this pub metaphor as far as I can), and the type of contributions those within it are expected to make to be heard about the chatter. To do that, and to build a reputation within that environment, it also means genuinely listening to what other people are saying; engaging with them, asking them questions, and contribute interesting things yourself in a similar tone of voice.

"My tone of voice is quite chatty," says Birmingham City University's Social Media Officer, Sundip Gill. "I treat Twitter and all the social media channels as if you were talking to your friend, so I always think that's the tone you should have, it's fun, but also professional – because you're a university and you've got guidelines. It definitely has to be fun otherwise you are just another corporate machine. Because we are a university, our main audience are probably between the ages of 16 to 24, so you've got to make the tone of voice catchy and fun enough to engage with them but serious enough for your message. It's about finding that balance and I think we do that quite well."

Personally, I prefer to adopt a more 'editorial' approach to social media planning. That means essentially having a strong, long-term idea of the kind of content you'll be posting, for whom, and how you can reach more of them.

To do that, you'll simply need to identify the following:

What is the overall business objective?

Why? Because it's all too easy to lose sight of the ultimate purpose of any marketing, project or social media activity if you're not careful. Ultimately, any social activity should tangibly support or help realise that goal in some way. For example, does the activity nurture applicants into full students? Does it keep current students informed and engaged?

Who are your key audiences?

In theory words, who are you speaking to, and who do you want to speak to online? More on this later, but this could be an in-depth persona database or a one-line sentence depending on context.

What stories do they engage with?

What content do your followers, or ideal followers, currently engage with most? Think how you could potentially optimise your website content to fulfil this need on social media.

What content will we post and share?

Based on the above business objectives, key audiences and content research, brainstorm ideas for socially shareable content marketing posts, key accounts to engage with and social media campaigns, competitions, events, etc. that'll engage with that audience.

So what have we learned

- Say no to spreadsheets filled with 6 months of tweets. Having authenticity is far more effective. Have a plan, but be flexible and responsive.

- Listen, and understand the environment of the community you're looking to engage with.
- Use a tone of voice that suits your audience and the platform.