Leading in 140 Characters or Less

It is hard to imagine a world without some variation of Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, Pinterest, and all the other media of digital communication. How these sites operate and their collective impact on branding and traditional media have been discussed exhaustively and will continue to be. Less examined, but nearer to my heart, is the effect these tools have on leadership, particularly in higher education.

I’ve received some attention as a fairly early and enthusiastic adopter of Twitter and Facebook. But like everyone else, I’m still learning the ropes. And as other academic leaders try their hand (some, of course, already use social media much more often, and more effectively, than I do), a consensus will emerge regarding best practices, advantages, pitfalls, and trade-offs.

From my perspective, digital engagement plays an indispensable role in the effort to be the kind of leader I want to be. Others are skeptical, or may even find the concept anathema to their idea of the college or university. But whatever one’s attitude, I submit that we best serve our stakeholders by adopting or rejecting social media for good and thoughtful reasons rather than by reflex, whether avid or fearful.

Before I come to choices, here are some numbers that might widen your eyes, as they did mine. As of January 2013, there were more devices connected to the Internet than there were people on Earth. In 2014, the average time people are spending on Facebook each month reaches 15.5 hours. Twitter logs over 300 million tweets every day. Virtually all—98 percent—of 18- to 24-year-olds use social media. According to one source, 40 percent of people said they socialize more on social media than face-to-face. In another study, 25 percent of smartphone owners ages 18 to 44 said they couldn’t recall the last time their smartphone wasn’t next to them.

Whatever else you might think of these statistics, the numbers are rather astounding. And they can’t help but affect the way leaders in education, business, and the nonprofit world think about their jobs. At a college or university, the decision to engage digitally with students, staff, alumni, and others—or to instead eschew digital communication for more traditional forms—simply doesn’t make sense without an awareness that 56 percent of Americans ages 12 and over have a profile on a social networking site or that nearly one-quarter of Americans use those sites several times a day. As the commentator put it in reporting the latter statistic: “How many other things do we do several times per day? It’s not a long list.”

Lest we think this is a phenomenon of youth—of kids and teens but not parents, alumni, or donors—consider this: the fastest-growing cohort on both Facebook and Google+ is people ages 45 to 54; the fastest on Twitter is ages 55 to 64.

And what about college and university presidents? I think a general impression might be that as a group, we’ve been rather slow to adopt social media. But like many other general impressions, this one seems to be wrong. Andrea Hanstein, public information officer at Fullerton College and president of the National Council on Marketing and Public Relations, points to one reason: “Encouraging a college president to establish a social media presence may seem unrealistic. Presidents barely have time to eat lunch, let alone monitor a Facebook page. But the truth is that many college leaders are already on social media and using it effectively.”

A recent Pew Research Center report found, in fact, that college and university presidents are actually quicker than the general public to adopt new technologies—and that one-half are active on Facebook and one-fifth on Twitter “at least occasionally.”

Should social media be a required part of a president’s skill set? Regarding presidential job interviews, one search firm executive noted in 2012: “I’ve never had a board bring it up.” But he predicted that soon every president will use social media: “Four or five years from now, you won’t even be asking this question. It will be assumed that everyone has a presence on social media and is savvy about how to use it.”

A better question than who is using social media in the executive suite is why are they using it—and how. I think the answer breaks into two parts. One has to do with crowdsourcing. We hear the term a lot these days, in some cases just as an au courant synonym for polling. At a higher education institution, though, it should mean something more.

A sense of community in higher education has everything to do with the co-creation of ideas. Colleges and universities are consensus-driven places to a much greater extent than for-profit entities, however enlightened the latters’ relationship with stockholders. Faculty, students, alumni, and staff make our institutions, quite literally, and they do so with ideas. How those ideas are created can be collaborative or intensely pri-
vate, but the ways they’re disseminated and judged are open, public, transparent. Academic peers decide whether research is fresh and important; self-governing faculties determine how they will manage teaching, publication, and service; alumni associations, boards, generous donors, and others influence the way a campus looks and runs, its priorities and programs.

All this is made easier with tools that reach further, faster, and less expensively into the minds of our constituents. A case in point is Iceland’s decision in 2011 to crowdsource its new constitution, using Facebook to engage citizens on what the new document should contain. “This is very different from old times,” one constitutional council member said, “where constitution makers sometimes found it better to find themselves a remote spot out of sight, out of touch.”

Out of touch is something that no leader can afford to be, and I don’t think it describes many men or women who aspire to lead in higher education. To choose not to enter the social media realm means a leader squanders a chance for more frequent, more immediate conversations with the people he/she leads, people without whose commitment, loyalty, and energy no institution can improve and grow.

Conversation is key. For most of us, the word brings to mind a leisurely walk across the quad with a colleague or a get-together to have coffee with a friend: discussing, clarifying, agreeing to disagree. But digital conversations don’t proceed that way, and that’s the other part of the answer for why and how to use social media in the executive suite. Social media’s whole raison d’être is speed and reach, which makes it terrific for giving communications a personal stamp and a vivid, you-are-there feel—a tweet from the floor at a basketball championship, say, or a Facebook response to a tuition increase. Like other technologies, though, social media risks eventually enforcing capabilities that it initially only offers—in the same way a campus looks and runs, its priorities and programs. But digital conversations are-there feel—a tweet from the floor at a basketball championship, say, or a Facebook response to a tuition increase.

I think this tension between possibility and necessity comes into tightest focus in crisis communications. Steven Sample, longtime president of the University of Southern California and author of The Contrarian’s Guide to Leadership, argues that for leaders, “judgments as to the truth or falsity of information or the merits of new ideas should be arrived at as slowly and subtly as possible—and in many cases not at all. . . . Don’t form an opinion about an important matter until you’ve heard all the relevant facts and arguments.” But even Sample makes an exception for “fight-or-flight situations,” when “black-and-white” thinking may be the only choice. In any crisis, by definition, speed is of the essence, and with social media in play, pace and audience take on different meanings—as does, I would argue, the idea of “crisis” itself.

Every administrator dreads a shooter-in-the-building scenario like the horrors that played out at Virginia Tech in 2007, at Purdue and Widener in January 2014, and at UC-Santa Barbara in May 2014. But in that kind of situation, a social media crisis plan is invaluable. Surprisingly, as of 2012, only 83 percent of higher education institutions had any crisis communication policy, and just 59 percent of those addressed social media.9

Unfortunately, the prime virtue of social media in a crisis—sending messages quickly to a large audience—can also tend to create its own crises by conflating every issue, controversy, or debate into a single category of speed-at-all-costs. In the effort to get out in front of a problem, to start a conversation first rather than react later, we have to be careful not to spread misinformation or blow up local issues into larger ones.

A bright spot, for the skeptical, is that digital engagement isn’t one-size-fits-all. The successful uses of digital platforms differ as much as the platforms themselves. Nor does social media have to supplant all other types of communication.

We each have only so many hours in a day, it’s true, but a social media strategy need not dominate the entire day to be effective. In any case, whether or not a president chooses to engage in digital communication, social media is helping to shape the environment of his or her institution. If that institution is to thrive (not just exist), leaders need to take a look that is long, slow, and careful at the media that are brief, quick, and provisional.

Notes


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