Chapter 3
Tweeting for Donors: How Institutions of Higher Education Use Social Media to Raise Funds

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ABSTRACT

Universities and colleges are embracing social media as a tool to spread the message about their institutions. Common uses include recruiting new students, connecting with current students, and staying connected with alumni. Nonprofit organizations in the United States also consider social media an important part of their fundraising toolbox, but use it more for recruiting volunteers, advocacy, and fundraising. Colleges and universities are also seeing the need to use social media for development purposes, whether they are private or state-supported institutions. This chapter explores how universities are using Twitter to promote year-end giving. Findings from this research suggest that while some universities seem to effectively use social media, others are inconsistent and even dormant in their messaging.

INTRODUCTION

Institutions of higher education in the United States are turning more to social media as a way to communicate with both internal and external audiences. Nearly all colleges and universities have adopted social media as part of their communications plans (Barnes & Lescault, 2013). Universities are using these interactive tools to
recruit students (Barnes & Lescault, 2013), to engage students in the classroom (Davis, et. al, 2012; also see edited volumes by Benson & Morgan, 2014; Pătruț & Pătruț, 2013; Pătruț, Pătruț, & Cmeciu, 2013), to engage alumni (Slover-Linett & Stoner, 2012), and to improve their overall image (Slover-Linett & Stoner, 2012). Universities are also using social media to fundraise, but do not know how to take full advantage of it (Stoner, as quoted in Lavrusik 2009).

While approximately 40 percent of four-year universities are private, nonprofit institutions (U.S. Department of Education, 2012), almost all colleges and universities depend on philanthropic support. In 2014, colleges and universities in the United States raised more than $37 billion in private gifts (Council for Aid to Education, 2015). In this way, even publically-supported universities operate like nonprofit organizations, actively fundraising to secure donations. Some colleges and universities have established separate nonprofit foundations to support their educational missions through private giving. As budgets continue to be limited, universities are depending more on private donations to operate (ASHE 2011). Both private and publically-supported institutions are looking for additional ways to attract these donors.

Alumni make up the core of individual giving to universities. More than 26 percent of private giving to universities comes from alumni, compared to 18 percent from non-alumni (Council for Aid to Education, 2015). Social media appeals to younger generations, making it an important tool for building a foundation of giving for young alumni (Longfield, 2014), a population that many universities feel is the most difficult group to contact and engage (Slover-Linett & Stoner, 2012). However, keeping young alumni engaged is important to long-term fundraising strategies as it encourages life-long giving, benefiting the university for years to come (Association for the Study of Higher Education, 2011). Traditional methods of communication are no longer sufficient for reaching the supporters (Wymer & Grau, 2011). New pathways for giving, such as those provided by social media, can also be important during times of financial concerns (Wymer & Grau, 2011).

Nonprofit organizations have also embraced social media, though in many different ways. The largest 200 nonprofit organizations in the United States had adopted social media as a communications tool by 2010 (Barnes, n.d.). Nonprofit organizations commonly use social media to increase awareness of the organization’s mission (Barnes, n.d.) and build relationships (Briones, et al., 2011). Nonprofit organizations also find that social media can help them enhance their accountability and transparency, as well as fundraising efforts (Waters, Burnett, Lamm & Lucas, 2009). Some nonprofit organizations use social media to educate the public about the organization’s cause and establish credibility (Levinson, Adkins, & Forbes, 2010). Nonprofit organizations are also engaging social media for advocacy activities (Guo & Saxton, 2014). The research suggests that universities tend to use social
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