

Don't be a digital dropout



How and why schools should use social media.

By Roberto Omozusi

For many schools, engaging in social media is as exciting as it is daunting. Like any new technology, there are risks that need to be managed. But developing an online identity through social media can be one of the greatest assets to a school's long-term communication strategy.

Unlike traditional mediums of communication, social media provides schools with a powerful platform to engage with their community. Schools recognise that they are facing an increasingly competitive and dynamic environment as parents look beyond academic performance and extracurricular offerings when selecting a school for their child.

How schools communicate with their audience is changing at a rapid pace, and technology is driving that change.

More than 70% of Australians use Facebook as a means of communication, daily. While glossy, branded brochures and well-presented school facilities initially build rapport and engage with prospective students, the ability to maintain effective communication that strengthens a school's brand, culture and affluence within the community is quickly becoming the social currency that defines a school's superiority.

The key to effective communication is to identify and understand:

- Who your audience are
- How they want to be engaged with
- How you can add value to the conversation or interaction.

Well-placed messaging on the following social media platforms can add value to your communication and community engagement strategy:



FACEBOOK

As of February 2017, Facebook had 17 million active users in Australia.

Statistics show that seven in 10 Australians use Facebook every day, making it one of the most effective tools for communicating with your community on a regular basis. Facebook gives you the opportunity to share timely, factual and engaging content in a cost-effective means. If you don't take the initiative to create and manage an official Facebook page, parents or students will do so on your behalf.

However, 'content is king'. This rule reigns supreme. Facebook posts should serve a specific purpose. The content you put on social media is as valuable to your school's brand as the brochures you hand out at orientation days. Inundating your audience with poor quality content is the fastest way to discredit the value of your digital identity.

We recommend that schools create a social media calendar and plan their posts in advance. Make sure you have a balance of informative and entertaining posts. Facebook is a great way to share links to your school blog or newsletters and direct traffic to the school's website and vice versa.

Facebook also possesses unique functionalities and features that allow you to target certain sections of your community based on their demographic profile. This allows you to tailor content and share information specific to their interests and needs.



TWITTER

A tweet is the shortest and sharpest form of messaging on social media and a great way for schools to share news, updates or links to their website in a message of 140 characters or less. Like Facebook's unique functionalities and features, schools can opt to tailor the settings of their Twitter feeds to suit the needs of their audience.



INSTAGRAM

Instagram is a photo-sharing platform that has five million monthly active Australian users. It is one of the best ways to visually showcase your school, its culture and its achievements, without inundating visitors with descriptive text. Create a hashtag for your school and encourage students and families to tag their photos from school events.



YOUTUBE

YouTube is one of the most popular video streaming sites, but it can be difficult to control the advertising that is placed near your channel. If you are keen to share videos, explore your options. Embedding videos directly onto your school's website can limit the risk of having your brand misrepresented.



In all instances, feedback and comments made online must be moderated regularly. Engaging with your audience builds trust and reinforces the authenticity of your school's brand.

SCHOOL NEWSLETTER

Your school newsletter should remain at the heart of your communication strategy. While there is no need to shelve the traditional printed newsletter, e-newsletters that are mobile friendly can be easily integrated in to your marketing mix. A consistently well-structured layout that includes eye-catching headlines, strong branding, white space and quality content is imperative. If you're looking to refresh your newsletter, think outside the square:

- Include infographics and statistics to break up text
- Add links to videos and media content from your website
- Incorporate dual languages, if appropriate
- Encourage the community to contribute story ideas and feedback.



When managed effectively, social media can add a unique level of engagement to your school's brand and strengthen your long-term communication strategy. ■

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