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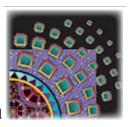Register Now

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10 Twitter Tips for Higher Education

Making a home in the Twitterverse, one tweet at a time

By Heather Mansfield — University Business, May 2009

MY FAVORITE QUOTE about Twitter is from Newsweek: "Suddenly, all the world is a-Twitter." It's true. Seemingly every time I turn on CNN or NPR there is a story about Twitter. From second-graders tweeting from classroom computers to churchgoers tweeting via mobile phones during services, Twitter is a phenomenon that is occurring worldwide and experiencing exponential growth. In fact, in March 2009 Nielsen Online reported that Twitter has now surpassed Facebook to become the fastest-growing social networking site—ever.

Simple and powerful, Twitter is a must for higher education. But it is much more than a site for pushing or breaking news about what's happening on your campus. It's a community where conversations occur and are inspired—that is, tweeted and retweeted. While there are some great examples of early adopters in the higher education community on Twitter, the vast majority of colleges and universities are still struggling with Twitter conversation etiquette and getting past the news pushing component of participating in the "Twitterverse."

Keep the Twitterverse demographics in mind: The vast majority of tweeters are 35 and older.

I created and manage a portal to colleges and universities on Twitter (www.twitter.com/higheredu), and based on my experience using the site, here are 10 of my favorite Twitter tips for beginners:

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1. Put authenticity before marketing. Have personality. Build community. Colleges and universities that are most successful at utilizing social networking websites like Twitter, Facebook, and MySpace know from trial, error, and experience that a "marketing and recruitment approach" on social networking sites does not work. Simply put, it comes across as lame to the technologically hip users of social networking sites. Traditional marketing and development content is perfectly fine for your website, e-mail newsletters, and print materials, but Web 2.0 is much more about having personality, inspiring conversation, and building online community. Nowhere is this more true than on Twitter. Relax, experiment, let go a bit, find your voice, be authentic.

2. Don't use Twitter for RSS or publish "News" unless you call your Twitter profile "News." RSS is definitely not authentic, lacks personality, and does little to no community building. It's a marketing tool that better serves media folks than the vast majority of your followers in the Twitterverse. No offense, but news releases are not that interesting to read. That's why Twitter profiles that are simply RSS have very few followers. So if you are going to use Twitter for RSS or to publish news releases, then call your Twitter profile "X University News" and create separate Twitter profiles for your other Twitter accounts. One example: @UCSDnews (www.twitter.com/ucsdnews).

To test this tip, sign up for an account on TwitClicks (www.twitclicks.com). You can get stats on how many people click your tweets.

3. Have many Twitter accounts. Create separate accounts for news, athletics, admissions, alumni, student life, etc., and then one account for your college or university that serves as a central hub for your Twitter presence. The more tweets and tweeters you have out there, the better. It's important to keep in mind the demographics of the Twitterverse. Less than 4 percent are 17 and under, and the vast majority are 35 and older. So currently, Twitter is not so great for the recruitment of traditional day students and is much better for engaging alumni and recruiting nontraditional students or online students. A few examples are @UTexasMcCombs, @UTMcCombsAlumni, and @McCombsTrainers.

4. Be nice. Be thankful. Reply and retweet. Twitter functions much like karma. The nicer you are to people in the Twitterverse, the nicer they are to you in return. The more you retweet (RT) others, the more they will RT your tweets in return. And whether it's Twitter, MySpace, Facebook, or YouTube, if someone does something nice for you in the public commons of Web 2.0, it is always a good practice to send a message of thanks. Expressing kindness and appreciation will make you stand out. You'd be surprised how few higher ed people on Twitter understand and implement this strategy.

5. Follow everyone who follows you. This is a hard one for a lot of colleges and universities. They want to keep their "Home" view clutter free and controlled and only follow a select few. Honestly, they only want to follow those whose tweets they are really interested in reading. But as I often tell higher ed officials, "This time it is not about you; it is about them." Web 1.0 communications is all about us and our messaging (i.e., our websites and e-mail newsletters). Web 2.0 is all about your supporters and their messaging. It's better to create a personal Twitter profile in order to only follow those select few you are interested in reading, but if you are going out on Twitter behind your college or university's logo, aka your avatar, it is a mistake to not follow all your followers in return.

Why? Twitter is about conversation. You can't have a conversation on Twitter if you are not following your followers. It is a one-sided relationship. Followers can't direct message you on Twitter if you are not following them. There is nothing more annoying on Twitter than to want to send a message to someone whom you are following only to find out that you can't because the person is not following you back. It's a snub. Let's face it: People on Twitter want to be followed. That's what the site is about. How can you build community on Twitter if you won't even participate with your followers?

Have a look around Twitter. You will see the most successful, retweeted colleges and universities follow everyone who follows them. I also help nonprofit organizations use Twitter (@nonprofitorgs). This group is growing so much faster than colleges and universities on Twitter, I think, simply because they are following in return, and the vast majority of colleges and universities do not. That is a big mistake if you are on Twitter to engage alumni or recruit new students.

Followers want good content from your institution. Make sure your tweets provide value.

6. Use " favorites" to organize the chaos and feature your most important tweets. If you are going to follow everyone who follows your college or university (which is hopefully thousands of people) then "favorite" tweets by those whom you are most interested in reading—as well as your most important tweets. The favorites option on Twitter is a simple, excellent tool to help you organize the chaos.

7. Don't tweet about your coffee (unless it is fair trade), the weather, or how tired you are. Provide value to your followers, not chitchat. It's one thing to chitchat about the weather, your headache, or how you need coffee to wake up in the morning if it's on your personal profile on Twitter, but it's quite another if you are using your institutional profile. The messages you send reflect upon your institution. Example of what not to tweet: "Got stuck in traffic this morning. Ugh! I need coffee and a vacation — and I think I am getting a headache!" No one likes a whiner (seriously) and this just makes it sound like the university is not a fun place to work. People follow you because they want good content from your institution on subjects relevant to your campus and programs. Make sure your tweets provide value and are retweetable.

8. Don't only tweet your own content. Twitter is a news source. Participate in news. Tweet articles or blog posts by your favorite newspapers, bloggers, or nonprofit organizations. If it is a good read or a good resource, it reflects well upon your institution that you tweeted it. There is also a good chance you might get retweeted if the article is deemed timely and worthy by the Twitterverse. It's all about getting retweeted on Twitter.

9. Send messages, but not via auto-responders. There are tools out there that will automatically message your new followers. Don't use them. It's spam. It's not authentic. It's not human. It's lazy marketing. If you are going to send messages, make sure you do so in response to a specific question or message that you

have received, but automatic "Thanks for following Such-and-Such University!" messages are boring and do nothing more than clutter your new followers' inboxes.

10. Limit your tweets to five per day, and definitely post no more than six. I have been polling on Twitter, and the Twitterverse has revealed that less is more when it comes to tweeting. Nearly half say three to five tweets per day is best, more than one-third say to keep it to one to two tweets, and only 10 percent say six to seven tweets per day. Know your followers!

Heather Mansfield, owner of DIOSA | Communications (www.diosacommunications.com), is an expert and speaker on how higher education can use social media to advance online communications and development strategies. She manages the Colleges & Universities profile at www.twitter.com/higheredu.

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