Twitter and Facebook and Blogs

Oh My! How to Avoid Social Media Pitfalls and Become a Marketing Wizard

Public Purpose asked social media guru Scott Stratten for advice on how colleges and universities can improve their use of social media. Stratten was the keynote speaker at AASCU’s 2011 conference for senior communications professionals. He is president of UNMarketing.com and author of UNMarketing: Stop Marketing, Start Engaging.

Public Purpose: How do you think colleges and universities can better use social media? What are some things they’re doing wrong?

Stratten: I’ve found that it’s similar to a lot of other industries, in that there are a few doing a great job, the majority aren’t doing any job at all, and a few are doing it terribly. That’s actually reflective of most industries.

The tragedy is that there’s so much potential with colleges and universities to use it, because their customers—their students—are using it, their potential students are using it, their alumni are using it. The demographic that’s hardest to reach is that teen demographic; they’re the most stubborn. They think they know everything. It’s a lucrative market to go after, especially in the high school grades, when colleges want to go after them. They’re the ones who are using Facebook. They’re now using Twitter more than anyone else.

To me the problem is, social media is tapping into the passive conversation. I don’t think industry grasps that. It’s the most honest, casual conversation that’s going. It’s a conversation between peers.

If I offered this tool 10 years ago to the heads of all colleges and universities across the United States, to listen to the conversations of the youth of North America, you can listen to what other schools are saying, and you can jump in and talk with them, each school would have paid me $50,000 a month to access this earth-shattering tool. But now that it’s here and it’s free, we question it? We wonder what the ROI is going to be?

PP: So what about the ones who are using it but are doing it wrong? What are they doing wrong?

Stratten: The biggest thing is broadcasting and not listening. They’ll have a Facebook page or a Twitter account that automatically links to a blog. It’s just a feed, like a fax. This “social media faxing” just kills me. It’s dangerous; there’s not much value to it.

PP: How is it dangerous?

Stratten: People see you talking on your account, so they’ll talk to the account, and no one will be listening. That’s dangerous. Say
I don’t think Twitter’s for everybody. . . . It should never be mandatory. The term “mandatory engagement” should never go across somebody’s lips or desk, because it’ll be a train wreck.

I’m thinking about enrolling or am a student currently, and I see you’re opening a new wing. I ask a question. No response. That looks bad to everybody who sees the question. It hurts your brand. It’s publicized customer service. And when you choose not to engage, you’re always marketing, good or bad. You’re always either increasing or decreasing that brand or your school.

PP: Is there a university that leaps out at you as being ahead of the pack on social media?

Stratten: One is Tufts University. In the book, you remember the story about the cafeteria?

PP: Yes, the thing about the student who tweeted about the bad apple pie, and the cafeteria manager tweeted back a sincere apology.

Stratten: Right. Well, not only is the cafeteria good with social media at Tufts, everybody’s great. The head of the university tweets every day and sets aside a time to answer student questions. If a school’s cafeteria can have a Twitter account, you can have a Twitter account at your school.

PP: That actually leads into my next question. In your book, you advise that people “tweet constantly.” A lot of people in higher education will respond that they’re already overscheduled, that their entire day is booked with meetings, calls, etc. Do you really think university presidents, chancellors, provosts, and deans should tweet constantly?

Stratten: Look, the thing is that we always find a way to make the time for our true priorities. Now when I say constantly, should the head of the university make tweets 200 times a day? No. But it should be more than once every two weeks! If I can walk to your house and ask you a question quicker than you can answer on Twitter, we’re doing it wrong.

If you can see the value in it, and you can spare some time—and I don’t mean two hours a day. If you have three hours a week that you can dedicate to conversational outreach, I’d rather you dedicate 30 minutes a day. If someone sees your account, asks you a question and doesn’t get an answer, that’s very bad.

I don’t think Twitter’s for everybody. . . . It should never be mandatory. The term “mandatory engagement” should never go across somebody’s lips or desk, because it’ll be a train wreck.

PP: Part of AASCU’s mission is to help create social mobility by making college available to more people. How do you think social media can help with this? Given that social media requires a computer and an Internet connection, do you think it’s still a predominantly affluent phenomenon?

Stratten: I don’t think that’s true anymore. I think it’s broadened and has shifted. Now that you have half a billion people on Facebook, we’re no longer catering to a very specific market. And a lot of that is due to mobile phones and smart phones. The mobile part can no longer be ignored. That is a huge part of how social media has exploded. It’s when you’re sitting or standing in line in the grocery store, when I’m waiting in a waiting room at the doctor’s office . . .

PP: What ways do you think social media and teleconferences/telesummits can be used more effectively in the university setting?

Stratten: One example is, last week I spoke to a class at Syracuse from a Starbucks. I was the guest speaker. I
used Skype. I had a camera facing the classroom that I could see, and they could see me through my camera. I spoke to the entire class. Students were tweeting about it; the teacher was tweeting about it. Instead of teaching out of a textbook, we can teach out of the world that’s out there.

**PP:** You say the students were tweeting as you talked to them. A common criticism is that Facebook and Twitter distract students from the focus on studies. What are your thoughts?

**Stratten:** Honestly, it is a huge distraction. I taught at a college here for eight years, a business course. The second- and third-year students were all on laptops. I make them close their laptops for the first half of class—an hour and a half lecture—then [they can] open them for the second half. I found that if I can get good content discussion in the first half, I can get more information penetration in half the time. If the laptops are open, forget it. I gave them all the notes from the class. I made them a deal: Give me the first half, and I’ll give you the second half, and you can do what you want.

There’s a difference between that and students who are bored because the content isn’t good enough. If students are bored, that’s our fault as teachers, as a school.

**PP:** Some believe that just as e-mail was the death knell for letter writing, text messaging and Twitter will have negative effects on students’ writing ability. What are your thoughts on this?

**Stratten:** If we’re going to blame technology for the downfall of the English language, we can look at text messaging as where it started. . . . It was the corporation that limited my characters to 140 on my phone! . . . For me, Twitter has actually made my writing better, because I write more concisely. I look for things that I can cut. So I think there’s a benefit to it.

. . . Twitter keeps me writing. It keeps my brain going, keeps the creative part of it going. . . . I don’t think three years ago, teenagers were sitting there with quill pens, writing sonnets.

**PP:** In the university setting, what are your thoughts on balancing the role of the university in enforcing rules against drinking and the right of students to privacy on sites like Facebook?

**Stratten:** We’re literally in a whole new world. We’re privy to things we would never see before. It’s not like underage college drinking is exposed where it wasn’t before.

On one side, to students, my advice is: Never say or do anything within Facebook or Twitter that you wouldn’t want to see on a billboard, with the head of your school and your mom driving by at the same time.

For the school, I don’t see a right answer to it. You can’t turn a blind eye to stuff, though, because that’s going to make it look worse. The safest thing I can do is: Don’t friend them on Facebook. Keep a professional separation.

When I taught, students would add me on Facebook. I would not add them. But if they requested me, I would accept them, and they would see a limited profile.

**PP:** Any further thoughts?

**Stratten:** It doesn’t actually matter whether or not the reader likes social media or likes mobile. It’s being used. And you have to decide whether you want your school to be part of the conversation or outside the conversation, because the conversation will happen regardless.

---

John R. Bell is a writer based in Northern Virginia. To read Bell’s review of Stratten’s book, please see page 30.
In recent months, federal regulations have been issued that could have a great impact on institutions enrolling military and veteran students. This article provides an overview of those regulations.

State Authorization and Distance Education

Considerable attention has been paid to recent distance education guidance issued by the U.S. Department of Education. Regulations affecting distance education and compliance with the state authorization provision are not tied directly to military or veteran students; however, because military students are predominantly distance education students, institutions with large military and veteran populations may find it prudent to monitor the issue. As of July 12, the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia voided the specific "state authorization" regulatory piece; however, the Department is reviewing the opinion and its options.

The regulation as written reminded institutions about the requirement to follow appropriate state authorization regulations—if they existed—when offering distance or online education in order to administer federal financial aid to those students. If institutions had not previously secured all applicable state authorization(s) by July 1, the Department would allow them to document a "good faith effort" until July 1, 2014, when compliance would be required for financial aid.

Regardless of whether the recent ruling is upheld, its underlying compliance principle means that a distance learning provider with military students located worldwide might need to apply for authorization in all states that require it. In addition to the administrative burden, application fees (which differ by state) could make this a very expensive proposition. Some institutions indicated before the ruling that, because of costs, they would have to limit the number of states to which they applied for authorization. Military students enrolled at those institutions would be able to continue their education only in states where these colleges sought/received authorization.

Revised Department of Defense Memorandum of Understanding for Institutions Participating in the Tuition Assistance Program

Institutions that participate in the Department of Defense (DoD) Tuition Assistance (TA) program for active-duty military students must have a signed Voluntary Education Partnership Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on file with the DoD and be authorized to receive TA funding. Otherwise, effective Jan. 1, 2012, they will be barred from receiving these funds. Because the TA program provided $531 million in 2010 for approximately 302,000 servicemembers, the impact of this program is significant.

In addition, institutions must abide by specific policies on metrics, reporting and invoicing as well as MOU addendums for individual branches of service. Institutions also will need to follow DoD procedures to sign the new standardized MOU as their current MOUs expire.

One notable inclusion in the U.S. Army and U.S. Air Force MOU Addenda dated March 15 is that an institution must accept the Government Purchase Card for TA if the institution accepts credit cards for other business transactions. Institutions enrolling military students under any DoD MOU requiring that institutions accept the Government Purchase Card will need to determine this financial impact versus payment via Automated Clearing House transactions or paper checks. A processing fee is charged to the "merchant" (in this case the institution) by the credit card company for credit card transactions. Generally,
Improvements Act of 2010 into law in 

President Obama signed the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act; however, it will change the Post-9/11 GI Bill’s payment structure and affect all student veterans, dependents and active-duty servicemembers using Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits. Other provisions also directly affect institutions.

The biggest single change is the removal of the tuition and fee charts constructed by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) for the original Post-9/11 GI Bill. Instead, payments will differ depending on whether a veteran student is attending a public or private institution. For public institutions, effective Aug. 1, the VA will pay "the actual net cost for tuition and fees assessed by the institution for the program of education after the application of (i) any waiver of, or reduction in, tuition and fees and (ii) any scholarship, or other Federal, State, institutional, or employer-based aid or assistance (other than loans and any funds provided under section 401(b) of the Higher Education Act of 1965 [20 U.S.C. 1070a]) that is provided directly to the institution and specifically designated for the sole purpose of defraying tuition and fees.” For private institutions, the VA will pay the lesser of net tuition and fee costs (using the same language as above) or $17,500. (Legislation proposed to grandfather students at private institutions costing more than $17,500 per year is under consideration.)

This “net cost” language requires considerable clarification and guidance from the VA, because any funding that is not designated for defraying tuition and fees—whether it be state-level veterans benefits, National Guard-related funds, institutional funds, third-party funds, or other funds—will fall under the scope of the language. According to the VA, an official guide will be released later this year.

Other major changes include the expansion of eligible institutions (previously only “institutions of higher education” were eligible), the expansion of eligible service to include specified types of full-time National Guard service and the elimination of all VA educational benefit housing allowances during term breaks (commonly known as “interval pay”). This simultaneous set of expansions combined with cutting interval pay will make counseling veteran students more complex.

Ripple Effects

Although all of the regulations discussed are important, institutions serving military and veteran students should pay particular attention to the potential interactions of these disparate regulatory areas and the ripple effects across campuses. A recent GAO report on the VA’s administration of the Post-9/11 GI Bill recommended that the U.S. Department of Education’s processing of federal student aid could yield pointers for better Post-9/11 GI Bill administration. This is another example of interaction—in this case, between different federal agencies—that can affect institutions and military/veteran students alike. AASCU and SOC will continue to monitor these issues and provide members with information as events warrant.

Lesley McBain is AASCU’s senior research and policy analyst and SOC special projects associate.