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THE CARL AND WINIFRED LEE HONORS COLLEGE
CERTIFICATE OF ORAL DEFENSE OF HONORS THESIS

Natalie Faculak, having been admitted to the Carl and Winifred Lee Honors College in the fall of 2008, successfully completed the Lee Honors College Thesis on May 25, 2012.

The title of the thesis is:

College Admissions Use of Social Media in Recruitment Marketing: A Literature Review & Strategic Plan for Western Michigan University's Office of Admissions

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jessica M. Brooks".

Mrs. Jessica M. Brooks, Office of Admissions

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Scott P. Hennessy".

Mr. Scott P. Hennessy, Office of Admissions

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Nina L. Laney".

Mrs. Nina L. Laney, Office of Admissions

College Admissions Use of Social Media in Recruitment Marketing:

A Literature Review and Strategic Plan for

Western Michigan University's Office of Admissions

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Western Michigan University

Lee Honors College

May 2012

Abstract

Social media technology is a rapidly growing communication phenomenon that digital natives, the generation of current 18-29 years old have embraced and revolutionized daily interactions. Social media technology is defined as “web-based and mobile applications that allow individuals and organizations to create, engage, and share new user-generated or existing content, in digital environment through multi-way communication” (Davis, Deil-Amen, Rios-Aguilar, & Gonzalez Canche, 2011). Emerging social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter allow users to create and maintain relationships with family, friends, coworkers, and organizations. The “always connected” generation of digital natives expects constant communication and instantaneous access to information that social media technology offers to users. Growing up in such a connected world, digital natives expect the same level of connectedness from business, organizations, and specifically higher education institutions. Higher education institutions have within the last 5 years embraced social media technology in order to maintain a relationship with prospective students of the Millennial generation. It is important to note that social media technology does not replace the significant of the higher education institutions’ webpage or printed publication. This emerging marketing strategy requires research, planning and set goals in order to become a successful in attracting prospective students. This document reviews current research literature on college admissions use of social media technology in recruitment marketing as well as offers a strategic plan for Western Michigan University’s Office of Admissions.

**College Admissions Use of Social Media in Recruitment Marketing: A
Literature Review and Strategic Plan for Western Michigan University's
Office of Admissions**

Introduction

Social media technology is an emerging communication phenomenon that directly affects and has changed how people communicate with another. Social media technology is defined as “web-based and mobile applications that allow individuals and organizations to create, engage, and share new user-generated or existing content, in digital environment through multi-way communication” (Davis, Deil-Amen, Rios-Aguilar, & Gonzalez Canche, 2011). The purpose of social media technology is to create and maintain a community of relationships and initiate a two-way conversation between users in a digital environment.

The last decade has revolutionized how users communicate and has created a “digital native” generation: “for the ‘always connected’ generation, multi-tasking, hand-held devices and nearly constant communication are normal” (Barnes & Lescault, 2011). The millennial generation, or “digital natives” ages 18-29 years of age, have only known an ‘always connected’ world with cell phones, wireless internet, and social networking sites being staple daily tools to communicate. It is this always connected and constant communication state of being that has sparked a social media revolution. Social media has only furthered the millennial generation’s need for constant communication and interaction via mobile web devices.

Social networking sites, one layer of social media technology, allow individual to create personal profiles and construct connections with other users. Social media sites include websites such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, and Flickr. However,

social media technology is a complex set of layers; it is not long before changes emerge and transform once again how users communicate through social media technology. Before researchers and users fully understand the capabilities of new technology, changes emerge transforming the communication tool once again: “As each application is experienced, other innovative technologies rapidly emerge, enabling new utilities for users” (Davis et al, 2011). Each social media application allows users to interact and create a dialogue “providing the opportunity to discover and share new information (Solis, 2008 as cited in Davis et al., 2011). The need for constant communication is fulfilled for the millennial generation through the plethora of social media technology available to use.

Growing up in such a connected world, digital natives expect the same level of connectedness from businesses, organizations, and specifically, higher education institutions. Higher education institutions have jumped on the bandwagon and embraced social media technology in order to stay connected with the millennial generation of prospective and current students. However, not all uses of social media sites are effective and higher education institutions must reassess their strategic plan in order to effectively engage students in a conversation via social media sites.

Literature Review

Among the most popular social networking sites utilized by college-aged students and higher education institutions include Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Flickr, and blogs. Each social networking site is unique in its opportunities and tools offered to its users. Facebook allows users to connect with one another in order to engage and maintain relationships via the Internet. Its mission “is to give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected” (facebook.com). The popular social networking

site originally launched in February 4, 2004 exclusively for Harvard students by Mark Zuckerberg, at the time a sophomore at Harvard; it then expanded to other Ivy League universities, and eventually to any university and high school students and currently to anyone over the age of thirteen (Reuben, 2008). Within eight short years, Facebook grew from a singular university social site into a worldwide social networking site achieving 900 million users April 24, 2012 (facebook.com). Utilized by mostly the millennial generation, college-age students of 18 to 29 years of age, the popular social networking site allows individuals to create personal profiles, follow and interact with family, friends, and fan pages used by businesses, organizations, and higher education institutions. The use of fan pages creates a virtual marketing strategy effective in engaging the millennial generation in dialogue regarding products, programs, and upcoming events. From its birth Facebook was rooted in the university setting; it is a prime atmosphere for colleges and universities to extend the campus into a virtual community where students can access it worldwide.

Twitter is a social networking tool that allows users to upload “tweets” or status updates of 140 characters. The real-time “small bursts of information” allows users to stay connected with other users, news, ideas, and opinions of celebrities, businesses, and other organizations active on Twitter (twitter.com). Twitter’s tagline offers a glimpse at what the information network has to offer: “The fastest, simplest way to stay close to everything you care about” (twitter.com). This microblogging service was launched in July 2006 by Jack Dorsey and rapidly gained worldwide popularity with more than 140 million active users today. Celebrating its sixth birthday this year, Twitter logs more than 340 million tweets everyday (blog.twitter.com). Twitter has expanded to allow users to share photos, videos, and websites concurrently with their 140 text-based

characters. Such a popular social networking site has the ability to target and communicate with a large and diverse audience in real-time as events unfold, keeping the audience engaged and interested in the business, organization, or higher education institutions. This social media tool is especially effective when paired with other marketing strategies and social networking sites; Twitter provides instantaneous, up-to-date information for immediate access by users creating a sense of connectedness and community.

Yet another social media technology utilized by business, organizations, and higher education institutions alike is YouTube. YouTube is a video-sharing social networking site that allows individuals to share original videos worldwide. The online video website was first activated in February 2005, but it wasn't until April 23rd 2005 that the first user-generated video was uploaded to YouTube. In six short months, YouTube experienced 100 million video views and 65,000 uploaded videos each day. Seven years later, in January 2012 YouTube has an average of 4 billion video views each day and 60 hours of uploaded video every minute (youtube.com). Videos have been used for decades to market products: "Universities have been making videos for 20+ years to aid in recruitment efforts" (Reuben, 2008). YouTube provides a free marketing arena in order to target the millennial generation. This interactive view of campus and student life allows prospective students to get a realistic feel and fit of the university.

Flickr was created in 2004 as an image and video hosting website for the online community. However, its main use and focus has been on user-generated photographs and Flickr provides an easy way to organize and share original photos with private and public audiences. Flickr allows users to interact with the photographs by adding captions, tags, and comments creating collections of pictures with a great time

commitment. The site currently hosts more than six billion photos with a steady daily growth of uploads. Not only is it used by individual online users but by businesses, organizations, and higher education institutions: “Universities have found Flickr to be a great tool to easily share photos with students, alumni, faculty and staff” (Reuben, 2008). Flickr allows prospective students to get a visual image of the university and create a connection with the campus community.

Another social networking tool utilized to continue the social conversation are blog platforms. Blogs, a combination of the words web and log, are online journals and usually authored by a single individual. With its original emergence in the 1990s with the launching of the World Wide Web, blogs have seen a steady growth in the last decade with the introduction of simple blog platforms such as Blogger, Wordpress, and Tumblr that allow users to easily post daily. Blog entries have expanded beyond text to include images, videos, and links to other web pages and social media pages. Businesses, organizations, and higher education institutions utilize blogs to further engage users in the digital conversation and allow a platform for feedback. Even social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Flickr have their own blogs to share the behind the scenes information of the company’s development, which allows for user input. Colleges and universities use blogs for marketing with having current students author their own experiences of student and campus life. This recruitment tool allows prospective students to have a realistic perspective of campus through the point of view of a current student with whom they can identify.

The social networking sites identified along with a number of other social media tools, are primarily used by the Millennial generation. The Millennial generation is comprised of those individuals born after the year 1980; this generation is accustomed

to an “always connected” world. These 18-29 year olds were born multi-taskers with the expectation for constant communication, given their access more hand-held, portable devices instead of land-lines and desktop computers. The Millennial generation is more attached to technology than any previous generation, which presents a challenge for businesses, organizations, and higher education institutions: “For US institutions of higher education, the competition for these students is fierce and survival ultimately depends on engaging them through the use of social media and new communication tools” (Barnes & Lescault, 2011). The Millennial generation has put marketing strategies and communication goals to the test within higher education institutions specifically.

Social media technology is a recent communication tool that has revolutionized the communication process people enact on a daily basis. However, with social media technology’s recent emergence in the last year and the constant innovative upgrades, it is hard for researchers to assess its effectiveness and actual capabilities in regards to relationship with its user demographic. Limited research has been published in the past decade regarding social media and any research statistics that have been published within the last 5 years have already become out of date for 2012. Yet, the research done can provide significant insights for higher education institutions’ current strategies in utilizing new social media technology by guiding users and institutions down the most effective path.

Social media technology can be an effective marketing tool in addition to a college or universities current branding strategy. Parrot and Tipton (2010) offer various strategies and tips in their research brief “Using Social Media ‘Smartly’ in the Admissions Process.” In the article, Parrot and Tipton utilized survey results completed by Widmeyer Communication of first-year undergraduate students in the fall of 2009.

The results indicated three key insights into the rapidly growing arena of social media technology. Eighty-one percent of students said the college and university Web sites as an important favor in their application decision; however only eighteen percent of students reported using social networking sites as sources of information for their application decision (p. 52). While there has been an increase of social networking sites in the application decision process, it is not the most important source of information for students researching higher education. Students turn to the school's website and printed publications for factual information during the application process: "In contrast, when students make their final enrollment decisions, they seek clues about 'personal fit.' Social networking sites—particularly "Class of XX" sites—can provide key insight—in an ongoing and easily accessible way—into the types of people prospective students are likely to encounter on campus" (p. 53). Higher education institutions' use of social networking sites should be integrated and mirror the marketing strategy of the school's website and printed publications. It is crucial to reflect the institution's strategic goals across all forms of communication with prospective students and their families.

In 2009, 95 percent of college admissions offices utilized at least one form of social media (Barnes & Mattson, 2010). Dr. Nora Ganim Barnes and her colleagues at Center for Marketing Research at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth have made great contributions to studies done on social media technology usage in college admissions over the past five years. The Center conducted the first statistically significant study on the subject in 2007. A year later, Barnes headed the first ever longitudinal study on social media use by college admissions offices, adding significantly to small pool of data and results in regards to social media technology and college admissions offices. In 2010, Barnes and Mattson extended the first study by adding

2009 data; the extended study showed a steady increase of social media use by admissions offices of four-year accredited institutions. Furthermore, US colleges and universities continue to lead the adoption and use of social media technology over businesses, including Fortune-500 companies. The study documented usage of social media by higher education institutions for recruitment purposes: “It is clear that online behavior can have important consequences for young people and that social networking sites can, and will, be utilized by others to make decisions about them” (para. 9). With prospective students being a part of the Millennial generation, admissions departments must join their world by partaking in the conversation via social media technology. Colleges and universities have steadily improved their presence and effectiveness on social networking sites, with a 56 percent increase in usage from 2007 to 2009.

The Millennial generation has grown up in an environment that is constantly connected and informational is instantly available; blogs have become a crucial strategy for admissions departments in the recruitment process in providing prospective students with authentic information from the perspective of current students at the college. In 2009, 51 percent of four-year higher education institutions had an admissions blog, an 18 percent increase from 2007 (Barnes & Mattson, 2010). Blogs facilitate interaction and conversation with the audience; if this goal is not met prospective student will lose interest and cease dialogue with the higher education institutions. Each year, schools are becoming more proficient with each social media technology allowing for a more effective communication strategy. Schools that accept comments on their blog have a stronger audience presence and more effective in continuing the conversation with students regarding higher education.

Barnes and Lescault (2011) expanded the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth Center for Marketing Research's studies on social media use by college admissions by reevaluating adoption and use of new communication tools in higher education. This research study follows Barnes' (2010, 2011) and colleagues previous work due to fascination "by the dynamic created by all the new tools and habits of Millennials" (para. 2). The 2011 study continued to support the original longitudinal study from 2007-2008; colleges and universities utilize social media technology in order to recruit prospective students. Admissions departments are beginning to understand the significance of strategic planning and communication goals on social networking sites and other media tools. In 2007-2008 61 percent of colleges and universities utilized at least one form of social media; in 2011, 100 percent utilize at least one form of social media ("Usage," para. 1). The most common social networking site utilized by college and universities is Facebook with a 98 percent participation rate; Twitter, a relatively new competitor on the social media field, has an 84 percent participation rate (para. 2). Moreover, higher education institutions are also expanding their blogosphere, allowing readers to comment on posts creating a two-way conversation. By creating an atmosphere for dialogue, admissions departments are allowing for prospective students to interact and maintain a relationship with the college or university. Not only are colleges and universities partaking in social media, they are succeeding: "respondents have consistently raved about their experience, especially Facebook (95% success) and YouTube (92%)" ("Success of Social Media," para. 1). The utilization and success of social media technology as a marketing strategy for admissions departments supports the importance and significance of new emergent role of social media, as both attitudes and technology tools continue to change.

Davis, Deil-Amen, Rios-Aguilar, and Gonzalez Canche (2011) examined the growing phenomenon of social media technology in higher education. However, this research study analyzed why social media has become such a significant element to colleges and universities' marketing and communication strategies. Social media technology has extending existing communities and created new online communities: "Social media technology links people together in ways that resemble traditional feelings of connection, belonging, loosely defined memberships, exchange of feelings and ideas, and the reporting of experiences and actions" (p. 3). The ability to create and maintain a community online is a significant advantage for admissions departments seeking to recruit prospective students for enrollment. Social networking sites provide an extension of colleges and universities' communities into the online arena, which is instantaneously accessible all hours of the day. Furthermore, students who held accounts on Facebook were more likely to engage in offline activities and had a stronger connection to their higher education institution (p. 14).

Social media technology provides a means to shape and share campus culture. This formation and extension of the campus community into a digital arena is "compatible with traditional forms of engagement and involvement", can "expand and maintain connections", and "increase participation in other off-line realms" (p. 16). Social interaction online does not limit face-to-face social interactions, but rather complements the relationship and can even provide useful in bridging the gaps. This holds true for higher education institutions seeking to create and maintain relationships with prospective students. Higher education institutions must join the social network populated by the Millennial generation in order to preserve the connection and conversation with prospective students. Social media technology has expanded upon

current media: “The medium – media technology and how it is used – shapes the social norms and expectations within a society” (p. 17). This new media raises expectations of users, as they demand instant access to information at the touch of a button.

Furthermore this new technology has allowed users to become more engaged with the medium and the message by generating original content and responding to previously posted messages.

Social media technology can be particularly helpful in engaging commuter students in a relationship with their higher education institution. Social media allows a connection with the college or university for students who live at a distance and commute or enroll online. These students prefer quality and meaning of the interaction to frequency of the connection: “Simply experiencing a sense of connection that was academically helpful or emotionally supportive symbolized to students a welcoming college climate” (p.22). The availability for a connection via the web gives commuter students the ability to build a social community virtually, which allows the students to create a college identity and find a sense of belonging among their peers.

Social media technology holds immense possibilities and opportunities for higher education institutions in order to expand and complement current marketing strategies and communication goals. The user-generated and user-driven technology is a rich source of data for research on potential audiences and current prospective students. Higher education institutions should embrace this rapidly growing phenomenon to better broadcast messages to a large, diverse audience at virtually any time of day. This media allows colleges and universities to engage students in a conversation to build a loyal relationship. Overall, social media technology “shows immense promise to enable connections with people, places, and things through the support of the most

fundamental of human behaviors, sharing” (p. 23). Social media technology holds immense potential for higher education institutions, including Western Michigan University.

Strategic Plan for Western Michigan University’s Office of Admissions

Currently Western Michigan University’s Office of Admissions is managing accounts on Facebook, Twitter, and a blog. However, the WMU Admissions technology team does not currently have a set, written guide, approach, or goals for the use of social media technology in recruitment and marketing strategies. In order to exploit the potential opportunities that social media offers, the technology team must have a thorough understanding of the medium and the goals of the Office of Admissions. Through research and personal knowledge and experience as a Western Michigan University student and employee of the Office of Admissions, I propose the following strategic plan for how to best utilize and expand upon existing social networking sites accounts for the purpose of engaging and recruiting prospective students.

In order to utilize social media technology effectively, the Office of Admissions needs to create a social media guide and handbook, along with a student social media committee. Both the handbook and student committee will allow the social media strategies to be uniform in voice and theme. While the University currently has a web page identifying basic rules and general policies for social media, it lacks crucial information, details, and basic resources. Vanderbilt University and the University of Delaware are great examples of higher education institutions that have implemented a social media guide or handbook (Appendices A & B). Each provides an overview of social media and glossary of terms, list of used platforms, policies, best practices, goals, evaluative measures, and resources. (Suggested strategies and goals will be provided

later in the document). The process of employing social media in the Office of Admissions will be more efficient with a similar guide for the technology team. Access to such a handbook will allow team members to become knowledgeable, use a consistent format, and provide useful suggestions and resources as the team works together to construct an effective use of social media technology.

Once the handbook has been drafted, a student social media committee should be formed. Social media provides multiple platforms for prospective students to connect with authentic current students of the university. Prospective students want to hear from real students as they research schools and which one is the “best fit”. The student social media committee can provide an authentic voice and share personal experiences with prospective students. Once a committee has been identified each member should review the drafted handbook and suggest any additions or changes. Every member should become familiar with the handbook and understand the Office of Admissions’ policies and strategies for using social media. The handbook should be updated as new technology emerges or changes arise as needed.

The student social media committee should be responsible for monitoring and updating each social media platform on a regular basis. For efficiency purposes, each member of the group should be responsible for overseeing one social media tool; this would include new updates to the sites, checking for regular updates, responding to any comments or questions, etc. However, every member should be able to contribute to the planning and posting of the specific medium. By creating a student committee, the university is ensuring a student-friendly social media platform to engage prospective students. In order to engage future students, social media tools should present a universal voice and theme, engage users in conversation, and be visually appealing. In

addition to the handbook, the committee should create a general posting calendar to keep posts up to date and provide relevant information on the platforms. It is crucial the students communicate with one another in order to remain on track with goals and develop new strategies for social media use.

The University's main homepage continues to be future students primary source of information when researching colleges and universities. However, social media technology provides rich opportunities to complement current marketing strategies and communication practices. Through social media Western Michigan University can target specific audiences with detailed messages, something the Website and publications are not capable of achieving. The ability to direct specific messages to niche groups for little to no cost is a significant marketing strategy. Social media creates a two-way conversation between the University and prospective students.

Before branching out into new social media technology, the Office of Admissions should first review and master the use of blogs, Facebook, and Twitter. A central platform for engaging future students is through blogging. Currently, the Student Ambassador Office has several students blog on a semi-regular basis. However, blog posts are sporadic and do not invite a two-way interaction. Student blogs should be updated weekly or more than once a month. The group of students should be diverse, providing prospective students with a variety of voices with which to interact. Posts should identify key features of college life, including, but not limited to, academics, campus events, pictures, personal anecdotes related to student life, the greater Kalamazoo area, pressures of being a student, services available, internships, and the process of applying to graduate schools. Students should ask questions in their blogs in order to encourage readers to comment on the posts; they should also feel free to post

relevant and appropriate video clips and photos for visual appeal. By engaging students in a two-way conversation, the University has a greater ability to recruit and aid the student with any questions or concern during the application and enrollment process.

Currently, the Office of Admissions is responsible for several Facebook accounts, including “Class of” 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, and 2018. Unfortunately, the updating and regular posting of information has not been consistent. The creating of strategies and a goal calendar, along with the student committee, will make updating the Facebook easier. Facebook is a prime location for students to get a sneak peek of Western Michigan University’s campus life and student spirit. Posts should include news, upcoming events, and questions for the specific audience. Images are an important element of Facebook as well; students should post pictures of campus, fellow Broncos, and events in addition to text for a visual dimension. Photographs are more likely to catch the eye of a prospective student, which will draw them to further engage with the Facebook page, website, and the University as a whole. The student social media committee should remember that the Facebook page is an extension of the campus community in order to create an interactive atmosphere.

Twitter has recently grown in popularity in the last couple of years and is even a more recent addition to the Office of Admissions social media toolbox in the last six months. The student social media committee, instead of a single admissions counselor, should run the Twitter account, @WMUAdmissions. By allowing a student(s) to update and maintain the account, the Twitter platform will remain an authentic student voice and furthermore, allow for a wider variety of post topics and photos. The student committee should also explore the idea of creating separate Twitter accounts exclusively as current WMU Broncos. One student attempted it recently, however due to infrequent

updates did not prove effective. By frequently “tweeting” and using a Bronco student account, the committee may have more luck engaging prospective students in dialogue. In this case, it may be useful for the @WMUAdmissions account to post upcoming events, deadlines, and fun facts; while the students could tweet current happenings and photos of their day on campus.

Once the student blogs, Facebook pages, and Twitter account have been sufficiently updated and organized, the Office of Admissions should add accounts to YouTube and Flickr. Video and images are appealing, interactive approaches to connect with prospective students. By adding a Flickr account, students university-wide, not just the social media committee, can add a diverse variety of photographs from campus events and student life. A rolling banner of photographs can be added to the Western Michigan University homepage, Facebook page, or tweeted. The images will provide prospective students with a glimpse of campus inspire excitement before they visit the University.

Similar to adding a Flickr account, the Office of Admissions should consider adding an additional YouTube account in order to upload videos created by current students. Admissions departments at colleges and universities have been utilizing video as a marketing strategy for over 20 years. Except instead of formally produced clips, informal videos by current Broncos would produce a genuine view of student life. Prospective students do not want to view long lectures by current professors; instead, students want to view a current student’s perspective. A quick, weekly video spotlight recorded by a student would further provide an entertaining way to convey crucial information or fun facts about the University. Each week could be themed or have a new

student host in order to maintain interest in the video account. Links to the video spotlights can be added to the homepage, Facebook, and tweeted.

Several strategies and suggestions have been made above for the Western Michigan University's Office of Admissions social media accounts. It is crucial to provide a cohesive package to prospective students and their families. Social media adds an authentic element and student voice to the vital webpage and publication resources. However, the social media accounts will only be effective with a strategic plan, unified voice, and student committee in place to maintain the various platforms. Social media technology is a rapidly growing medium in the world's "always connected" environment; the Office of Admissions must embrace the technology and master the tools in order to engage efficiently with the Millennial generation. This document provides a starting point for the Office of Admissions in the use of social media technology. Social media should continue to be researched by the committee for new technology and maintain successful strategies.

Conclusion

Social media technology offers an attractive advantage to higher education institutions as a low-cost marketing tool to recruit prospective students. However, an institution cannot simply create an account and hope future students find them. It is a marketing tool that requires research, planning, and goals in order to be successful in attracting prospective students. Also, it is important to note that social media does not replace the significance of the higher education institutions' webpage or printed publications. Prospective students turn to the institution's webpage and publications first for factual information regarding the application process, academic programs, and financial aid. Social media technology complements the webpage's information with

genuine student voices about their own college experiences. In addition, social media has the ability to target niche audiences that the homepage and publications may not be able to achieve. This document assesses Western Michigan University's Office of Admissions current use of social media and provides suggestions for future steps in order to effectively and successfully embraces the rapidly growing technology.

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Appendix

Appendix A

<http://web.vanderbilt.edu/resources/social-media-handbook/>

Appendix B

http://www.udel.edu/socialmedia/pdfs/SocialMediaGuide_1102.pdf