



How colleges keep up with the changing social media landscape

Modifications to popular platforms leave users second-guessing their value

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In higher education, social media isn't a project, it's a process—a function like customer support, but open 24/7 and always waiting for a crisis to blow up. The strong dichotomy at the core of social media often leads to opposite views and experiences of the channels. There are rarely in-betweens with social media.

In the wake of the Facebook-Cambridge Analytica scandal, the Congressional inquiry and the kickoff of the Global Data Protection Regulation in Europe, the big social media platforms have been in reactive mode since the beginning of the year.

Changes confuse users Facebook, Twitter and others have been cleaning up their privacy dust bunnies, tightening community rules, and editing advertising and API access policies on the back end. They have also asserted more control over what users see in their social feed through algorithmic tune-ups.

Meanwhile, Snapchat has rolled out a new design that has disoriented users and puzzled organizations as well as on-the-fence advertisers. A new rule requiring you to follow back your followers to make sure they see what you share left many professionals disillusioned.

The word among higher ed social media professional circles is that the little ghost isn't worth the effort anymore. Yet, Snapchat is still the most used platform for 35 percent of surveyed teens, ahead of YouTube (32 percent), Instagram (15 percent) and Facebook (10 percent).

Instagram's strategy of copying most feature introduced by Snapchat has resulted in several schools pausing efforts with the latter and redirecting them to the former.

Reading the numbers

As higher ed digital marketers, we need to follow the lead of our targeted audiences when selecting communication platforms. Fortunately, with social media we don't have to operate in a data desert.

Three years after its last survey on the social media usage of 13- to 17-year-olds, the Pew Research Center indicated an important shift in its latest study, ["Teens, Social Media & Technology 2018."](#)

According to this survey, Facebook hasn't only fallen from grace in the news. Use of the platform among teenagers has taken a 20 percentage point dip in three years to land at 51 percent.

Fortunately for Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook's other social media property, Instagram, has seen a 20 percentage point change in the opposite direction, now used by 72 percent of 13- to 17-year-olds.

Context is everything

While it's impossible to reach people on a platform they don't use, context is everything with marketing. Fortunately for marketers, two other research studies on the digital preferences of college-bound students were conducted this year: the 2018 E-Expectations Study from Ruffalo Noel-Levitz and the Eduventures Student Sentiment Survey.

I was given access to all the results for the first study and the data set pertaining to social media for the second. In both cases, data on daily social media uses place Facebook in the fourth position behind Snapchat, YouTube and Instagram.

In the Eduventures study, prospective students were asked how often they researched colleges with the various social media channels they use. YouTube ranked first for 57 percent of high school seniors and 61 percent of juniors.

In the E-Expectations study, prospective students were asked to select the "best channels" to learn about college. YouTube topped that list again for seniors at 39 percent, followed by Instagram (36 percent), Facebook (32 percent) and Twitter (19 percent).

The social media landscape of the college search process is changing. While the general trends point to an increasing importance of visual messaging platforms like Instagram and Snapchat, YouTube is currently the top platform in the college search.

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