

Two birds, one post: Social media management as a class project and departmental communication tool

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Introduction/Need for Innovation

In postsecondary agricultural communications programs, the body of literature reveals student application of agricultural communications concepts through internships has been among the most sought-after experiences for agricultural communications graduates across time (Cartmell, 1994, Bailey-Evans, 1994; Sprecker & Rudd, 1997, Simon et al., 2005, Morgan & Rucker, 2010). However, not all agricultural communications programs require internships (Cannon, Specht, & Buck, 2016). Faculty, therefore, can help students gain experiences by implementing guided, active learning environments such as those suggested by Crawford, Lang, Fink, Dalton, and Fielitz (2011), including co-curricular activities and classes with collaborative, problem-based and cross-disciplinary learning opportunities.

Social media is an important aspect of marketing communications. However, in a survey of more than 1,000 higher education institutions, the Council for Advancement and Support of Education found 67% of respondents had no full-time employee dedicated to social media activities (Council for Advancement and Support of Education, 2013). In 2019, we implemented an experiential learning social media practicum in AGCM 3223: Digital Media in Agricultural Communications at Oklahoma State University to simultaneously achieve two objectives: (1) provide hands-on social media management experience and (2) support departmental social media activities.

How it Works

As part of a class focused on digital media, the social media practicum requires students to plan, create, and monitor social media campaigns. Students assume the role of content creators for the [department name] Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter accounts. The students work both individually and collaboratively to develop a social media strategy, create content, use social media management tools, and monitor results.

Before students work to create content, the entire class (1) conducts an audit of existing departmental social media efforts, (2) develops audience personas for target audiences identified in the audit, (3) develops a description of voice and tone to be used to reach those personas, and (4) identifies topic and content strategies for the given semester. Involving students in this process, rather than simply providing it to them as a guideline document, is an important step to help them learn and practice how to develop social media strategy in other contexts. Students are assigned a departmental beat topic, and their contributions to the social media practicum throughout the semester must be related to this beat topic. A beat is a particular topic or subject area a reporter covers and is a common practice in journalism. Beats vary each term but generally include departmental majors, graduate programs, and the department as a whole. This helps ensure departmental social media content is varied and diverse and challenges students to use reporting skills developed in other agricultural communications courses to generate content ideas.

For the individual portion of the project, students are tasked with developing social media posts demonstrating specific attributes at several times throughout the term. For example, post

attributes might include photos, videos, or links; content attributes might include hashtags, tags, emojis, or quotes; and topic attributes might include events, alumni or student spotlights, research highlight, or behind-the-scenes posts. A social media management tool is very important to the logistical success of this portion of the project for several reasons: (1) it allows students to practice using a tool similar to one they may use in a professional communication setting, (2) it facilitates a review, feedback, and approval process, and (3) it provides advanced reporting features such as content tagging that can assist the instructor in evaluating student performance and outcomes.

For the team portion of the project, students are assigned to a team of three to five students based on their beat topic. As a team, the students propose and complete two “story takeovers” posted to Instagram and Facebook. The story takeovers must relate to one of a selection of topic areas, which are pre-determined by the instructor. Student proposals include topic, date, what post or content will be featured (photos, videos, boomerangs, still slides, animations, or interactive tools built into Instagram), and a description of team members’ roles. The social story takeover portion of the project encourages and allows teams to be creative and think outside the box. Proposals are an important component of this portion of the project, as they give the instructor an opportunity to provide feedback and guidance in advance. Additionally, because stories get posted directly to the department’s pages, students must agree to a policy developed in conjunction with the university social media team that provides guidelines for behavior.

The success of the social media practicum depends heavily on teamwork. From developing strategy to planning content that does not overlap with another student to ensuring all teammates are active participants in story takeovers, students must work collaboratively. Therefore, we incorporate two peer evaluations that contribute to a student’s grade throughout the semester.

Results to Date

The social media practicum has been successful in both objectives. In two semesters, 55 students have participated and left the course with hands-on experience managing social media campaigns and measurable evidence of their proficiency. Year-over-year performance increases for [university department] Facebook include a 333% increase in impressions, a 266% increase in reach and a 110% increase in engagement.

Future Plans/Advice to Others

We plan to continue using a class-based social media practicum for content creation for [university department]. While we find value in this model and have achieved measurable improvements, we do recommend a paid employee maintain responsibility for on-the-fly social media posts and social listening and community management. We also advise instructors to remember that the student practicum is a learning opportunity, and mistakes will be made. The beauty of social media is that it is editable and adjustable.

Cost/Resources Needed

We negotiated a discounted educational rate with Agorapulse and pay \$149 per month for six licenses (one per topic beat), which is \$209 per month without a discount. Cellular-enabled phones (\$1,000 with a monthly data plan of \$40 per month) are beneficial for social story takeovers, as is a computer. In our case, students can access equipment through the department.

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