

Navigating the Social Media Learning Curve

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In 1999, having a website was the be-all, end-all. Today, having a presence on Facebook is now the imperative. Businesses need to have a presence in places where customers congregate. Today, that place is Facebook.

— Paul Chaney

(Blog: The Social Media Handyman, Twitter @pchaney,

Author: *The Digital Handshake*)

In recent years, terms such as “social media” and “social networking” have become staples in the university continuing education marketer’s vocabulary. According to research by the Nielsen Company (2009), two-thirds of Internet users worldwide use social networks, and social networking has surpassed e-mail as the fourth most popular online activity. Similarly, a new study from Noel-Levitz (2010) indicated that not only are many colleges and universities offering links to social media resources like Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn on their websites, but also prospective students believe more institutions should be using social media.

While statistics like these indicate the potential for utilizing social media as a way of marketing continuing education programs to current audiences, or reaching new ones, few higher education marketers have navigated this slippery slope with success. This article provides both a working knowledge of the social media landscape and practical applications of the concepts using a case study approach from a Midwestern university. Throughout are a number of definitions of commonly accepted terms related to social media and examples of how it was successfully—and less than successfully—applied to programs being marketed through the University of Wisconsin Extension’s Division of Continuing Education Outreach and E-Learning (CEOEL) from 2006 to 2010.

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THE SOCIAL MEDIA LANDSCAPE

While there are a number of different definitions of social media, the term generally refers to the media based on user participation and user-generated content. Social media can take many different forms: blogs, forums, message boards, wikis, podcasts, social bookmarking, picture-sharing, and instant messaging, just to name a few. Some specific examples of popular social media sites include YouTube, Flickr, Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter.

A March 2010 e-mail survey of college and university enrollment and admissions officers across the US by Noel-Levitz, Inc., found that many colleges and universities offer links to social media resources like Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn on their websites, but prospective students believe even more institutions should be getting on board with social media. Seventy-four percent of current college-bound high school seniors thought that colleges should have a presence on social media sites, and 81 percent of those students indicated they look for both official and unofficial content about a university when they go online.

No doubt statistics like these make university marketing departments feel the pressure to try more innovative tactics. A January 2010 survey of 533 senior marketing executives in the Marketing Executive Networking Group (MENG) by Anderson Analytics looked at the importance of various marketing trends and found that, while social media is viewed as even more important currently than it was last year, it—particularly Twitter—also remains a point of frustration for marketers. Frustrating or not, the importance of social media to the marketing mix cannot be overstated. In the same survey, about 70 percent of marketing executives said they were planning new social-media initiatives in 2010. And these same executives were more likely to rely on internal employees to implement these initiatives than outside agencies.

According to the Nielsen Company (2010) the most popular social media sites in May 2010 were Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Classmates.com. Facebook.com attracts more than 400 million active users (June 2010), of whom more than half log in on any given day. The average Facebook user has 130 friends and more than 160 million objects to interact with, including pages, groups, and events. Twitter receives approximately 3 million tweets an hour depending on the time of day and day of the week (Reed).

Users are specific-content consumers. Twitterers mostly consume news, MySpace users want games and entertainment, and Facebookers are into both news and community (Van Grove).

THE GENERATION X STUDENT

Contrary to popular belief, today's most popular social-media networks are not dominated by the youngest, most tech-savvy generations, but rather by middle-aged people, or those approaching middle age. For example, 64 percent of Twitter's and 61 percent of Facebook's users are aged 35 or older, a group known as "Generation X." Generation X refers to the 44 to 50 million Americans born between 1966 and 1979 (Jamieson). This generation marks the period of birth decline after the baby boom and is significantly smaller than previous and succeeding generations.

Generation X's media and recreational habits are different from those of the Boomers, as are their relationships with their parents and society. Below are a few common characteristics of Generation X (Coates, Jamieson):

- *Individualistic and self-directed:* Raised in the era of the first public awareness of AIDS, Generation X grew up in a time of two-income families, rising divorce rates, and a crumbling economy. The grunge movement and hip-hop music came from Generation X's displeasure with a conservative society. Women were going back to work en masse, leading to the age of the "latch-key" child. As a result, Generation X is independent, resourceful, and self-reliant. Generation X values learning by doing and dislikes being micro-managed.
- *Technologically adept:* As the first generation to grow up with computers, Generation X'ers lead lives interwoven with technology. This generation is comfortable using PDAs, cell phones, e-mail, laptops, Blackberries, and other technology employed in the workplace and university. Technological innovation linked this cohort to the world in a way never achievable by any previous generation.
- *Flexible:* Many Generation Xers lived through tough economic times in the 1980s and saw their workaholic parents lose their hard-earned jobs. Thus they became less committed to one employer and more willing to change jobs to get ahead than were previous generations. They adapt well to change and are tolerant of alternative lifestyles. Generation Xers are ambitious and eager to learn new skills, but they want to accomplish things on their own terms.

- *Valuing work/life balance:* Unlike previous generations, members of Generation X are motivated more by a need for a work/life balance than money, favoring flexibility over long-term employer/job loyalty.

THE GENERATION Y STUDENT

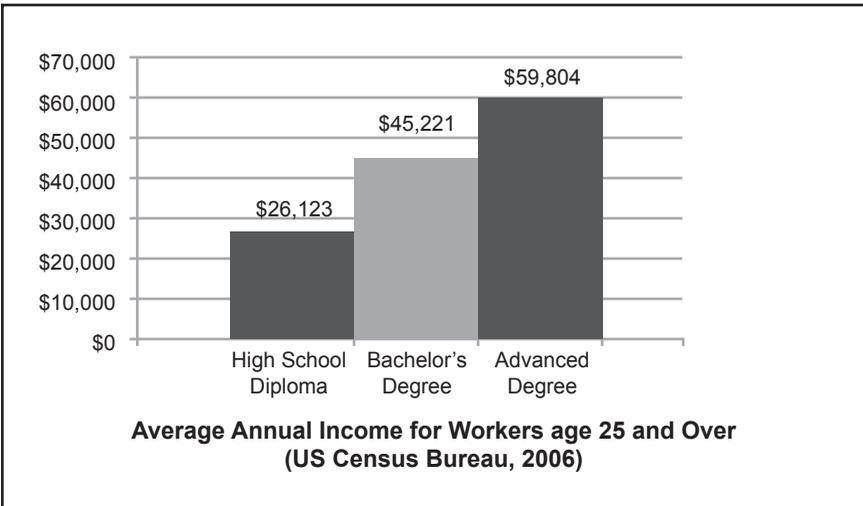
Born between 1980 and 1994 (Jamieson), Generation Yers are mostly in their 20s and are just entering the workforce. With numbers estimated as high as 70 million, Generation Y (also known as the Millennials or the Net Generation) is the fastest-growing segment of today's workforce and is vastly different from previous generations, especially the Boomers (Coates).

Generation Yers are considered to be mature and resilient, and they are fast learners (Jamieson). Here are a few common Generation Y traits (Jamieson, Coates):

- *Tech-savvy:* Generation Yers grew up with technology and rely on it to perform their jobs better. Armed with BlackBerries, laptops, cell phones, and other gadgets, Generation Y is plugged-in virtually 24 hours a day, seven days a week. This generation prefers to communicate through e-mail and text messaging rather than face-to-face.
- *Achievement-oriented:* Nurtured and pampered by parents who did not want to make the mistakes of the previous generation, Generation Y is confident, ambitious and achievement-oriented. It values making money—more money than any previous generation, and sees education as a means to this goal. At the same time, like Generation X, it wants learning to be entertaining, interactive, and fun.
- *Team-oriented:* As children, Generation Y participated in team sports, play groups, and other group activities, so it values teamwork and seeks the input of others. Part of a no-person-left-behind generation, Generation Y is loyal, committed, and wants to be included and involved.
- *Attention-craving:* Generation Yers crave attention in the forms of feedback and guidance. They appreciate being well informed and seek frequent praise and reassurance.

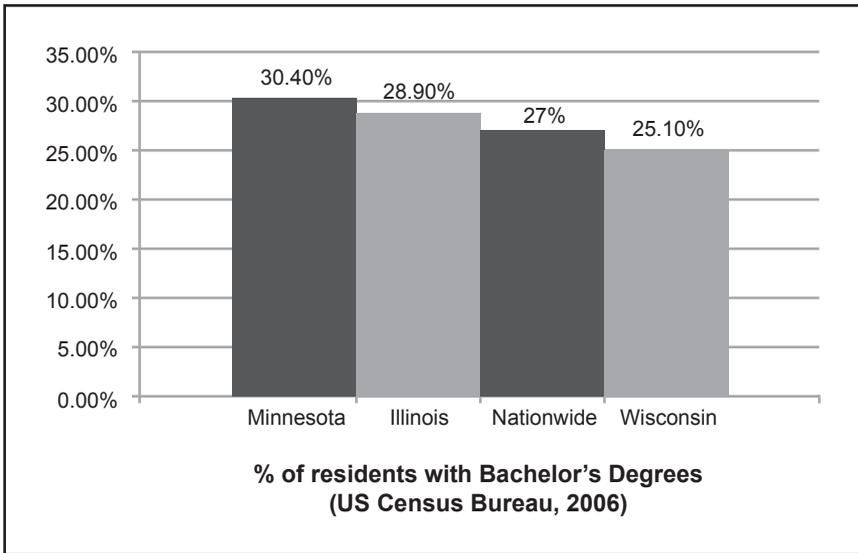
THE STATE OF HIGHER EDUCATION (AND THE ECONOMY) IN WISCONSIN

Why did the University of Wisconsin-Extension start to care about the Gen X and Gen Y populations in 2006? According to 2004–2014 occupational employment projections from the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development, Office of Economic Advisors, jobs requiring a bachelor’s degree are projected to grow at a faster rate than the the overall job market. From 2004–14, the overall job market in Wisconsin is projected to grow by 11.5 percent, while jobs requiring a bachelor’s degree are projected to grow by 18.7 percent. At the same time, the benefits of increasing the number of college graduates in Wisconsin are clear:

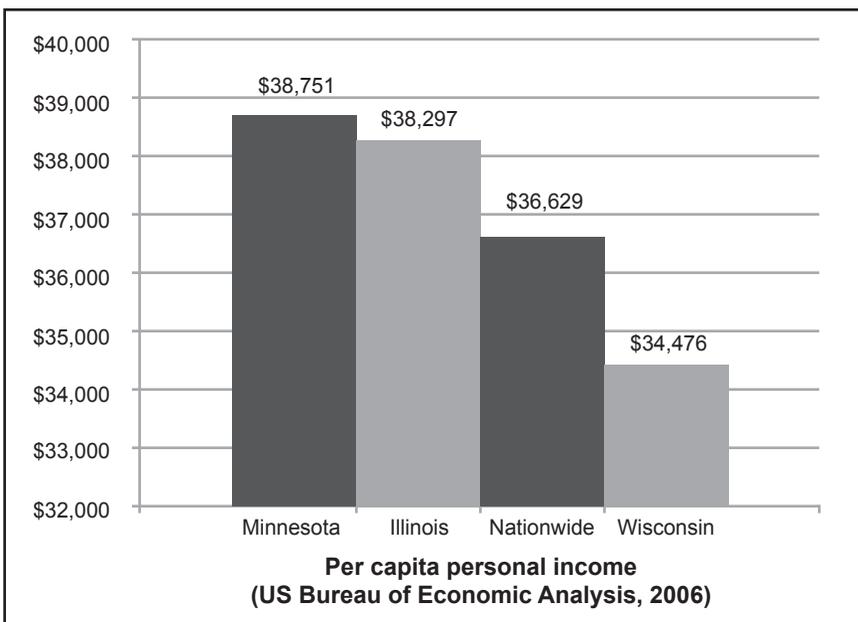


- Increased earning power
- A vital, growing state economy
 - Businesses and industries typically locate in areas where there are skilled workers with college degrees.
 - Businesses add to the tax base, as do well-paid workers.

Wisconsin has many people with associate’s degrees, but a much lower percentage of its residents have bachelor’s degrees compared with its neighbors and the nation as a whole (US Census Bureau, 2006):



At the same time, Wisconsin lags behind Minnesota and Illinois—and the nation—in per capita personal income:



A breakdown of US Census Bureau data indicated approximately 1.2 million Wisconsin working adults aged 20 to 45 had completed some college courses but had not earned a bachelor's degree. A 2005 survey by the University of Wisconsin System Market Research Unit projected that 60,000 people aged 20 to 45 would be very interested in enrolling in a de-

gree program over a two-year period. This led to an increased emphasis in marketing efforts to two population “generations”: Generation X and Generation Y.

In 2006, the University of Wisconsin-Extension and the University of Wisconsin Colleges spearheaded the Adult Student Initiative, a project aimed at increasing the number of adult, nontraditional students working toward a baccalaureate degree. Ultimately aimed at producing 72,000 more four-year college graduates by 2017, the Adult Student Initiative includes a variety of targeted efforts to support the objective of helping adults return to school, including creating new flexible degree programs that are appealing to adults.

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-EXTENSION CASE STUDY

As a result of the Adult Student Initiative, Generation X and Generation Y audiences became the targets of a series of new marketing initiatives at the University of Wisconsin-Extension’s Division of Continuing Education, Outreach, and E-Learning (CEOEL). Reaching an audience inundated with marketing messages and skeptical of advertising claims meant reworking traditional marketing techniques and incorporating social networking into the overall marketing strategy.

UWin

CEOEL dedicated \$2 million over three years to raise awareness about degree-completion opportunities at the 26 University of Wisconsin campuses, create new pathways to degrees by converting existing programs to online, begin an adult student advisory network, and promote these programs to prospective adult students. Marketing initiatives included customized letters to previously enrolled students, radio ads, online and print ads, print mailings, a dedicated website, a customized publication, and a Facebook page.

Focus group research helped determine the logo and the color palette for the website (<https://uwin.wisconsin.edu>), which provided students the ability to instant message with a student services representative. The Facebook page was promoted in April 2008 with customized, branded e-mails to prospective students in the recruitment database. Within the first week, approximately 24 people “friended” the page.

The marketing department was responsible for developing new social-networking features, while the student services department maintained the existing page. Problems existed on both fronts. Marketing developed

a branded blog, which included content from an adult-student adviser. However, the project never launched because of staff cuts resulting from budget pressures. Although the staffing was in place, student services did not update the Facebook content on a regular basis, which was perhaps the reason for no growth in membership. Owing to a breakdown in communications, the marketing department was not notified that the individual responsible for maintaining content took the page down when resigning from CEOEL a few months later.

Independent Learning

The University of Wisconsin Independent Learning (IL) has been offering self-paced courses at a distance since 1892. Today, IL offers courses in more than 40 subjects in both online and print-based formats. This program primarily attracts traditional students who are taking single courses to fill out a semester schedule.

In December 2008, student services e-mailed 740 students in the IL database inviting them to join the IL Facebook group. It has slowly grown to approximately 200 members and nine discussion groups as of June 2010. Comments are primarily students looking to interact with others taking the same self-paced course. Typical posts have included:

- “Is anyone taking any Spanish literature courses?”
- “Anyone taking Italian??”
- “I’m about half through with meteorology and getting ready for the first exam—any experienced person out there who can help me with a couple issues?”
- “Hello! Is anyone taking or has anyone completed U448-378, History of Africa since 1870?”

Since these are students in self-paced courses, it stands to reason that they would be looking for other students with whom to interact. While some of these posts have received some feedback from other students, many are still not generating discussion with others in the classes. To push use of these tools to the next level, new strategies need to be explored to encourage interaction among the disparate students in the program. Encouraging professors to interact once the students have created these topics might be one way.

The Online Bachelor of Science in Sustainable Management

The online Bachelor of Science in Sustainable Management is a collaboration among CEOEL and four University of Wisconsin campuses: UW-Parkside,

UW-River Falls, UW-Stout, and UW-Superior. The Board of Regents approved the degree in May 2009, and the first students were enrolled for the fall 2009 semester.

Marketing for the degree included many traditional methods: print and online ads, radio, and public relations at the local, regional, and national levels. The traditional marketing and public-relations plan was integrated with a social-media plan that, once again, included online chat, a Facebook fan page, a Twitter page, a Twitter news page for journalists, and a LinkedIn page.

As of June 2010, the program has 531 Facebook fans and 471 followers on Twitter. Both student services and marketing staff make posts approximately 10 times per month to the Facebook site, which automatically feeds the Twitter page. Typical posts include:

“This program is awesome!! I'm really learning about sustainability and how we can make a difference! Thanks UW-Extension!”

“Check this Green Jobs book out, it is amazing!”

– From students and community members

“Stop by the Green Collar Job Symposium and meet Crystal Fey, Program Manager, UW SMGT. It's this Saturday May 1, at the Madison Labor Temple, 1602 South Park Street, 9:30–5:30. Attendance is free.” (received 4 comments and 2 likes)

– From the marketing department

“Summer registration is now open. Please go to www.sustain.wisconsin.edu and click on Registration to get started.”

– From student services

Our public-relations specialist for purely media-relations activities created a second Twitter page (@GreenDegree). Currently there are 45 journalists following that site. Marketing also promoted blogs of four first-year students. Posts were linked through Facebook and Twitter. Finally, marketing created a LinkedIn page, but with only 11 members, it is not being widely used or promoted. Future plans are to use the site to reach out to business owners active in the green / sustainable movement or who may

have employees interested in the program. All of these social networking links are aggregated and promoted through the degree's website (<http://sustain.wisconsin.edu>).

Current developments for the 2010-11 fiscal year include launching a Wikipedia page, submitting material to iTunes U, and posting videos on YouTube and photos on Flickr.

LESSONS LEARNED

Our third attempt at deploying social media in the higher education space has been our most successful to date. We gained more fans and have seen greater interaction among those we did gain. After nearly four years of navigating the social media landscape, we have learned some clear lessons.

Support your e-recruitment with social networking. Enrolled and potential students are on social networks, and even more importantly, they are open to campuses being on them as well. While social networking will not take the place of other recruitment efforts, it can be a dynamic element of your e-recruitment program. It provides an opportunity to develop a relationship with students who would otherwise be searching your website anonymously. If you are not in the social networking space, now is the time to step into it.

Maintain a healthy mix of media, and integrate social networking into your master marketing/communications plan. Our best successes have combined traditional promotional methods such as e-mail and online ads with social networking.

Collaboration is key. You cannot do it in a silo. Collaborate with student services, IT, and program faculty for content ideas.

Understand the budget implications—in people not products. Although creating Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and other social networking sites is free, and there are free tools out there to help you analyze their effectiveness, it takes considerable staff hours to maintain an effective site. It has cost CEOEL at least 10 hours each week in planned, orchestrated staff time to find content, post it, and engage in the ongoing conversation. It is vitally important to have the right team in place to support the ongoing maintenance needs of your social networking projects, and to ensure your organization can keep them going if a crucial member of the team leaves.

Define your goals and communicate them clearly throughout your organization. Our first effort—the UWin site—was deemed a failure because students were not enrolling in programs and interacting with the site. But many of

us in marketing had other objectives. We viewed the project as a test of social-media tools and as a means of generating brand awareness, not as an enrollment tool. Had we been measured by those standards, we might have pulled the plug on the project. These sites can be used for many different reasons, from building brand awareness, and improving student services by creating an emotional bond with prospective or enrolled students, to serving as a search engine boost. Whatever your goals, know them before you launch your site, and make sure you and your administrators agree.

Focus, focus, focus. If jumping into the social media landscape still feels more like diving into a stormy sea headfirst, select the one site that seems to match your target audience demographics and target goals most closely, and focus your efforts on that. Do not spread yourself too thin by trying multiple initiatives at once. Pick your top network, get comfortable with it, and have some easy successes before you consider going back for more. 🌐

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