

What Should We Be Teaching Our Students About Digital PR?

Collaborating with Top Industry Bloggers and PR Twitter Chat Professionals

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ABSTRACT

Academic studies rarely combine professional industry expertise with curriculum ideas, yet this type of partnership is very valuable for instructors trying to keep pace with quickly changing PR practice and social media tools. This study, which shares pedagogy recommendations from top social media professionals for building digital skills within existing public relations courses, attempts to fill that gap.

INTRODUCTION

An increasing number of practitioners agree that social media is changing how public relations is practiced (Wright & Hinson, 2012). The Universal Accreditation Board's 2010 Practice Analysis reveals that 74% of participants spent "some" or "a great deal" of time engaging in social media relations work in the past year (Sha, 2011).

As industry grapples with how to incorporate 24/7 social media into an already full week, professors struggle with how to best teach this new content and integrate social media into an already full curriculum.

Social Media in PR Curriculum: A Range of Opinions

Todd (2009) reports that while past studies show agreement between educators and professionals that PR curriculum is on target, her own research, which compares opinions of PRSSA professional and faculty advisors, indicates some differences in the value each place on particular skills. For example, professionals place more value on teaching new media technologies, such as blogging and hands-on technician skills, and preparing students for their "first job" in PR rather than their "last job." Faculty place more value on teaching ethics.

Social media pedagogy is also a reoccurring topic of conversation and focus at PR conferences. During recent sessions, leaders and attendees debated to what degree educators should be responsible for teaching social media content as opposed to learning through internships and on the job. PR executives presented a range of opinions. For example, at the 2012 Edelman Academic Summit, Richard Edelman said students need advanced technical skills to set them apart: "I would say that one of your primary tasks, educators, is to have your students come into our firms able to show and tell: fully able to do infographics, willing to do short form video... just being totally facile."

Tyler Helling of Facebook advocated a different approach, focused on fundamentals. He noted that people change slowly: "I think it would be wise to study people and the interactions that they have on the platform, versus so much time thinking about the technology." Richard Gingras of Google believes in a blend of tactical and conceptual learning. In considering whether it was a waste of time to teach journalism students Flash, which has diminished in importance, he said: "Tools come and go, but those people who learned Flash developed core skills that they can easily convey to any new tool set... any programmatic environment."

The authors followed up with presenters at the Edelman Academic Summit, AEJMC, and PRSA International Conference to ask more about conversations that took place during their sessions. According to PRSA International Conference Educator's Academy speaker Michael Kuczkowski, general manager, Edelman San Francisco, some things change so quickly – such as what to do with a brand's Twitter presence – that it's not necessary for professors to chase each shiny new object. "I don't need to see a long list of platforms that graduates know to make a hiring decision," (M. Kuczkowski, personal communication, January 22, 2013). He believes PR educators do not need to be teaching every platform and measurement tool, although he does see value in infusing discussions of social media issues, like regulations and privacy, into existing courses.

AEJMC presenter Phil Gomes, senior vice president of Edelman Digital in Chicago, agrees that a tactical focus on tools is the wrong approach. In fact, according to Gomes, educators often do not have access to the more worthwhile fee-based monitoring and measurement tools (P. Gomes, personal communication, January 9, 2013). However, this is not to say that social media topics are not an important part of public relations curriculum. Gomes recommends, for example, that research courses teach online conversation analysis and writing courses address use of hyperlinks and SEO (search engine optimization) tactics. "Success is the degree to which departments are not praying to hire a genius professor but cracking open their syllabi and pouring digital into it" (Gomes, personal communication, 2013).

Gomes, who also spoke at his organization's Academic Summit, acknowledges that one challenge in preparing students for digital PR careers specifically is that you can't simply pour all advanced skills such as audio production, visual storytelling, and graphic design into existing courses. According to

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TABLE 1. Blogger Study Participants, based on PRWeb's "25 Essential Public Relations Blogs..."

<u>BLOG NAME</u>	<u>BLOG URL</u>	<u>BLOGGER INTERVIEWED</u>
Brian Solis	http://www.briansolis.com/	Brian Solis
Communications Conversations	http://www.arikhanson.com/	Arik Hanson
Social Media Explorer	http://www.socialmediaexplorer.com/	Jason Falls
PR in Your Pajamas	http://www.prinyourpajamas.com/	Elena Verlee, Cross Border Communications founder
Buzz Bin	http://livingstonbuzz.com/	Priya Ramesh
Spin Sucks	http://spinsucks.com/	Gini Dietrich
PR Couture	http://www.prcouture.com/	Crosby Noricks
Beyond the Hype	http://www.blog.loispaul.com/	Lois Paul
Deirdre Breakenridge	http://www.deirdrebreenridge.com/	Deirdre Breakenridge
Journalistics	http://blog.journalistics.com/	Jeremy Porter

Some blogs listed above are written by multiple bloggers. We listed the name of the blogger who participated in the survey.

Gomes, everyone at Edelman has a smart phone and soon will have video editing at their desktops. He wants these skills to remain within the purview of a liberal arts education. "Edelman's perspective is that if you show up [as an entry level employee] with graphic design and video production skills, we'll do everything short of giving you your own office" (Gomes, personal communication, 2013).

Introduction to Present Study

The purpose of our research, conducted in April 2011, is to get more specific feedback about essential digital competencies and address how these skills might be integrated into PR curriculum. This study is the follow-up to a 2008 study of social media specialists at large U.S. PR agencies, which identified themes regarding what PR professors should be teaching students about social media. Themes included strategic thinking, fast-paced decision making, online relationship building, and the importance of measurement (Anderson & Swenson, 2008).

This present research adds additional voices to the pedagogy discussion by focusing on professionals heavily involved in social media day-to-day.

METHOD

Blogger E-mail Survey

We sent an e-mail survey to 25 top public relations bloggers, identified through their inclusion in PRWeb's list of "25 Essential Public Relations Blogs You Should be Reading." We asked bloggers a set of open-ended questions. The response rate was 42%, with 10 of the 24 blogs participating (one blog had been discontinued). (See Table 1.)

Twitter Chat

We also held a "Twitter chat" – an emerging form of a group interview or focus group. This chosen method reached the right audience and represents the type of innovation in social media use we hope to inspire in the classroom. Joan Lewis, a top research executive at Procter & Gamble, predicts that survey research will decline while social media research will increase by 2020 (Neff, 2011). According to Lewis, "social-media listening isn't only replacing some survey research but also making it harder to do by changing consumer behavior and expectations... The more people see two-way engagement and being able to interact with people all over the world... the less they want to be involved in structured research."

We gathered our data by serving as guest panelists on April 5, 2011, for the weekly #PR20Chat hosted by Fleishman-Hillard social media con-

sultant Justin Goldsborough (@JGoldsborough) and Geben Communication president Heather Whaling (@prtini). We asked five interview questions one at a time, allowing 10 minutes of response time for each question. Questions were designed to probe deeper into themes that emerged from our earlier research with social media experts (Anderson & Swenson, 2008).

Currently, there are more than 175 registered #PR20Chat members. These are PR professionals who actively use social media technologies. On the day of our #PR20Chat, approximately 120 participants generated 1,500 tweets for this study. We received IRB approval before conducting the blogger and #PR20Chat study, and obtained permission from Twitter chat participants quoted in this study to use their Twitter handle names.

The original research themes were identified when analyzing data from the 2008 social media expert study using open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). After identifying the 2008 themes regarding what we should be teaching students about social media, we wanted to delve deeper in this current study into how, specifically, professors could help students build these skills.

Each research question for this current study of blog and Twitter participants was based on a research theme from the earlier study. For example, social media experts told us we should be teaching students how to make decisions quickly, so for this study we asked, "How would you train young professionals to develop solid decision-making skills in a fast-paced social media environment?"

For every research question, we used the open coding procedure to organize the responses into sub-categories that emerged under that particular theme. For example, there were 120 tweets in response to the "decision-making" question. We grouped the responses by commonality to identify the sub-categories that emerged. For instance, one participant's idea to have students answer questions in class via Twitter to develop speed and accuracy was grouped with similar ideas that eventually became the "hands-on practice" subcategory, whereas responses that emphasized the importance of research and strategy, or developing a theoretical foundation before engaging online were grouped together in what became the "proper preparation" sub-category of how best to teach students how to make solid decisions quickly online.

RESULTS

Bloggers and #PR20Chat participants were asked similar questions (available from the authors upon request). The results are reported together below.



Decision-making Skills

Proper Preparation. Responses indicate a need to orient students' mindsets toward using social media professionally before having them jump in as participants. PR professionals agreed that making good decisions under pressure requires a solid understanding of ethical principles. They advocated a general "do unto others" approach to commenting or responding on social media.

Participants also noted that the ability to think fast requires an understanding of clients and audiences. For example, it is helpful to answer the question, "what would my supervisor do?" before having to respond to a situation quickly and professionally.

Professors also should help students understand social media from a business perspective, highlight the difference between personal and professional use, and prepare students to deal with reluctant management fearful of negative comments and loss of control over communication.

While many participants emphasized practical aspects of social media use, some firmly recommended teaching theories and principles first and then blending this knowledge with practice. There was consensus that case studies and examples are essential to teaching decision-making.

Hands-On Practice. Finally, professionals believed there was no substitute for hands-on practice in many forms. Blogger Jeremy Porter suggested, "Why not use Twitter to gather feedback for a class report? Create a video to share via YouTube to share a message? Have a competition to see who can generate the most retweets for a specific message? Create a Facebook Group for your class at the beginning of the session and have discussions all semester - get people used to using the tools and get creative."

Participants suggested simulations and role-playing activities for everything from learning to talk to senior executives to dealing with crises. Others recommended creating a classroom that would reflect a real-world pace, such as treating class sessions like news conferences or board meetings and using tools such as Facebook or Twitter to require high-speed participation in class.

MattLaCasse. *Frankly, the only way to train them is to have them do it. I'd start w/ having them build their own online community. #pr20chat*

Participants in Dialogue

Connect with Your Audience. The first sub-category that emerged about engaging audiences in dialogue, rather than simply disseminating information, is to know your audience. **Blogger Deirdre Breakenridge** believes that to understand an audience is to "use a sociological approach to communications, observe behavior in the community and realize that communication is more about becoming a meaningful resource and giving customers what they want, rather than just delivering messages. To participate is to become a part of the community, and to be seen as a peer and a provider of valuable information."

Important elements of engagement included being relevant, tying to current events, using humor, and sharing interesting information. Participants emphasized storytelling as an effective way to reach publics:

julia_prior Q2. *Tell them, we are so saturated with ads and information these days, [audiences] don't have time for an ad. They do have time for a story. #pr20chat*

Build Relationship and Conversation Skills. A second sub-category was learning to build relationships and create conversations. Multiple respondents emphasized teaching students the importance of two-way communication. Advice for creating dialogue included asking questions, balancing talking with listening, and joining conversations such as Twitter chats.

Among tips PR professionals shared for building strong relationships were transparency, responding to both positive and negative feedback, and thanking people. Concrete ideas for learning included showing examples of good and bad conversation, as well as writing a blog and responding to comments in order to practice online engagement skills. Participants also recommended that organizations be "human," and "personable," and develop a "voice."

Nearly all PR professionals agreed that the quality is more important than the quantity (which applies to the messages you send, your number of Twitter followers, etc.). Blogger Jason Falls said, "We've got to get the mentality of "more is better" out of our student's mindsets. We also need to teach that automation breeds impersonalization, and impersonalization breeds contempt. We need to focus on the relations part of public relations and make sure that we're building relationships with our publics, not pissing our messages at them."

Balancing Community Value and Company Objectives

Participants debated whether organizations should be as concerned about the goals and values of the community as their own interests, but they generally landed on achieving a balance or even placing a greater emphasis on "adding value to the community." This question resulted in three clear patterns.

Choose Mutually Beneficial Objectives. First, adding value to the community and achieving your own organization's objectives need not be mutually exclusive; they can be one-in-the-same.

Put the Online Community First. Second, many PR professionals agreed that the community's values must come first, the organization's objectives second.

jspepper @pr20chat. *Community comes first. You can't plop down into a community and bend them to your will. It's the other way around. #pr20chat*

Find a Good Match for Your Organization. Third, professionals emphasized that a community's values and your organization's objectives need to match:

rexr @pr20chat Q3. *If your objectives don't line up with those of the community, you're doing it wrong. #pr20chat*

Several mentioned that contributions can provide value to the community while achieving your organization's purpose. One chat participant suggested measuring value by tracking the amount of feedback for Tweets or Facebook posts. **Blogger Priya Ramesh** offered advice for explaining the engagement-objectives connection to executives or clients: "I've seen cases where people say, 'this is a great company that gets our problem; let's do business with them,' but it may take a while. Engage *right* first, before you start questioning ROI. Trust that it will happen. Building loyalty takes time."

Measuring Results Online

Know How to Apply the Basics. Many PR professionals said measuring online results is similar to evaluating traditional PR. They emphasized that measurement should be continual, rather than only at the end of a program. Good measurement requires setting measurable objectives, understanding how tactics and strategies connect to objectives, and knowing how PR objectives tie to overall business objectives. **Blogger Arik Hanson** said, "For me, the answer to this question has less to do with what tools you use, and far more to do with how you use the data you glean from your measurement activities to drive real value for your organization. Learn how to interpret your data. Use your blog analytics to drive new content in the months ahead. Take your Facebook data and use it as a key decision-making input for future status updates and Facebook campaigns. You get the idea."

Practice Using a Variety of Digital Measurement Tools.

Other respondents acknowledged that students need to learn how to measure digital PR efforts specifically, should be familiar with Web analytics tools such as Google Analytics, Radian6, and social media ROI calculators, and should use more than one because they offer different insights. One person pointed out that new tools that allow us to track and measure conversations have led to new ways to measure PR more generally, beyond simply tracking media impressions.

PR professionals in this study agree that it is difficult to teach students about measurement without having them actually do it through hands-on projects and case studies. Given a particular situation, students should be able to answer whether PR is a good solution and what value it brings.

Andrew_ShipPR. *Design a class around studying a company's digital strategy, then reaching out to agency/pro and asking Q's for reasons why. #PR20chat*

Practitioners acknowledged that it is difficult to keep up with developments in new measurement tools. They recommended that educators partner with professionals and measurement software companies and depend upon organizations such as the Association for the Measurement and Evaluation of Communication (AMEC).

Thinking Strategically About Social Media

Strategy – knowing why you are implementing a certain social media tactic and how you expect to reach your objectives – was a reoccurring topic in discussions about how best to prepare students for using social media as professionals. In the words of one respondent, strategy involves more than just sending tweets or being on Facebook. Respondents generally agreed that strategic thinking is an advanced skill.

Make an Abstract Concept More Concrete. One participant advocated a big picture approach, thinking of everything you say via social media as a whole rather than as individual posts. Several practitioners said that to teach students to think strategically, curriculum should focus on how using social media may address a business problem. One concrete idea for getting students to think from a business perspective was to:

juliennejenkins @pr20chat A7: *Have them imagine a meeting with the board where they must justify their SM activities. CEOs like to see ROI. #PR20chat*

Blogger Gini Dietrich has developed this method for teaching new professionals to think strategically: *"I start off by asking them to think about what success looks like (sometimes you*

have to make it personal; i.e. what do you want your wedding to look like or what do you have to do to win every baseball game?). Once they can describe what it looks like, at the very end, you have them back it out. What has to happen to get there? It takes a long time, but it helps them think big picture before details."

PR pros recommended looking to innovative social media campaigns to motivate students to come up with their own creative strategies and to show how social media benefitted those organizations. Blogs also were mentioned as a source of strategic inspiration.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND DISCUSSION

This present research probed deeper into how to teach social media-related content that professionals believe is important. For example, rather than simply stating that "dialogue is important," this research asked practitioners who are engaging with consumers online every day for specific strategies to inform pedagogy and ground it in up-to-date practice. Findings contain specific ideas professors can implement in their classrooms.

The message we first heard in our research with social media experts five years ago – that students need to learn to use social media not just for personal use, but strategically in a professional context – is echoed in this current research and shapes our approach in the classroom.

Like many of the PR conference presenters, we advocate a critical-thinking approach toward teaching social media rather than solely focusing on skills or tools. However, like our research participants, we endorse a hands-on approach to studying business problems, which is both more engaging to students and necessary for learning. Students often need to understand the basics of a platform or tool before it is possible to have a conversation about how best to use it strategically.

As the debate over social media education continues to shake out, it is important to continue to understand how social media is reshaping the public relations industry. Incorporating social media into a course does not necessarily mean displacing three weeks' worth of existing course material, but rather updating course examples to include social media. However, taking a hard look at whether existing courses could be cut or revamped to focus on design, production or digital storytelling skills could provide students with a competitive edge.

The goal does not necessarily have to be for students to become proficient in every aspect of social media, but for them to gain a general understanding and curiosity. This type of self-directed, lifelong learning is the most important skill required to keep up with constant social media changes.

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