

***Social Media for Strategic Communication:
Creative Strategies and Research-Based
Applications***

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In the last 15 years, a veritable explosion of social media channels has entered and forever changed the practice of public relations. What does this mean for public relations educators? Well, if you are committed to preparing students for careers, it likely means you are constantly evolving your pedagogical approach. While our ethos of ethically building mutually beneficial relationships remains foundational, preparing students for the digital landscape means that we, as professors, need to consider how this fast-paced environment impacts students' ability to think strategically and effectively produce content. In fact, the most recent Commission on Public Relations Education report (2018) indicates that employers are most concerned about what entry-level practitioners can produce and do, including writing for the web. Further, the report indicates that social media is the most highly rated technology-curriculum topic by practitioners.

In the book, *Social Media for Strategic Communication: Creative Strategies and Research-Based Applications*, Karen Freberg (2018), associate professor of strategic communication at the University of

Louisville, takes a comprehensive approach to preparing students to produce social media content and enabling them to compete for industry positions with a social media focus. In the book, Freberg draws both on research and practitioner insights from various disciplines. Focusing on strategies, behaviors, and mindset, the text is both a guidebook and resource for professors, practitioners, and students alike. Based on her own research, experience teaching social media, and significant professional connections, Freberg's text takes the guesswork out of how to approach and teach strategic social media.

Book's Composition and Organization

The book is thoughtfully organized into three parts, first focusing on foundations, followed by strategies, and concluding with careers. In the first part, Freberg frames strategic use of social media as both an art and science, then takes the reader through the ethical and legal considerations of communicating on social media. At the conclusion of part one, the text reinforces the importance of research by reviewing social media monitoring, listening, and analysis. This framework is then built on throughout the remainder of the text.

In part two, the focus is on strategy-based campaign planning concepts ranging from audience segmentation and writing for social media to budgeting, calendaring, and evaluation. Importantly, Freberg does not propose that strategic planning for social media is different from public relations. Instead, she expands on foundational concepts taught across the core of the public relations curriculum. For instance, the first chapter of part two of the text takes readers through the strategic campaign planning process using language that should be familiar to any public relations student. The following chapters dive more deeply into each step and expand on the topics in a social media-specific context, including areas such as influencers, creators, managing and curating content, and common writing mistakes on social media.

In part three, the focus is on ensuring the reader understands the pervasive role of social media by covering specializations as diverse as entertainment, crisis communication, sports, nonprofit, health care and international communication. Concluding in this way allows the reader to consider how all they have learned could be applied in different disciplines and myriad interests.

Book's Strengths and Weaknesses

Rather than focusing on platform features and trends, this text offers a clear framework for developing a strategic mindset, which keeps the content from getting old. For example, each chapter of the text begins with a “Humans of Social Media” feature that introduces the reader to thought leaders in the field. Rather than aging like so many social media case studies, these interviews provide industry-relevant insights that frame the chapter content.

The utility of the text is further strengthened by the use of tables and figures that break up what could be dense reading and provide quick reference to key concepts. For example, tables that provide a comparative glimpse at performance metrics reinforce the importance of advanced and behavioral metrics as compared to basic metrics (e.g., likes, followers). Other tables offer examples for students to reflect on (e.g., sample vision statements, sample content calendars), while others offer templates for their own efforts (e.g., social media audits, content templates). Further, the thought questions and exercises that conclude each chapter offer ready-made discussion prompts and assignments that apply chapter learning outcomes to real-world scenarios.

One critique of the text could be the lack of emphasis on paid social media strategies. There are presently a few pages dedicated to the topic in the budgeting section of Chapter 10. Additional passing reference to paid content is included in relevant chapters. However, I would argue that with algorithms limiting organic reach, this topic is

central to a strategic social media mindset. To overcome this limitation in my own courses, I have supplemented with digital certifications and simulation-type activities that provide a more well-rounded view. A more comprehensive discussion of the role of paid social media seems an appropriate addition for future editions of the text.

While the book provides an in-depth review of important topics like ethics and legal fundamentals, a second area for improvement would be an enhanced focus on diversity-related content. For instance, including accessibility guides and multicultural perspectives would be valuable in the sections focused on understanding the target audience. Additionally, examples that highlight model approaches to equity-focused social media communication would help students understand best practices. Further, lifting up diverse voices in the “Humans of Social Media” profiles and resources would also improve students’ understanding of strategic social media careers.

Who Would Benefit from Reading this Book?

When considering textbooks for a strategic social media course at my institution, I compiled a comprehensive list and narrowed the options to four possible texts. I then gathered a group of a dozen students from varying classes across the public relations curriculum and allowed them to review and offer their thoughts on the options. The students unanimously chose the Freberg text because of the low cost and ease of reading, as well as features like interviews with industry insiders, tables that synthesize key topics, and an abundance of resources. I shared their sentiment and the text has now been used with high praise from students and instructors alike for three semesters.

In addition to a foundational text for social media courses, the practical insights and research-based approach of this book makes it appropriate for instructors looking to supplement their other public relations courses or activities. For example, I have referenced chapters

related to monitoring, listening, and analysis in a research methods course. The book's sections on strategic planning, budgeting, evaluation, and calendaring provide an additional resource for students developing campaign plans, such as those for the capstone. The content related to writing offers supplemental insights for a public relations writing course or sections of a broader writing course seeking more specialized modules. This text is also useful outside of the traditional classroom. For example, the professional branding content has proved useful as part of programming for the Public Relations Student Society of America at my college. Also, I have encouraged graduates starting careers with a social media role to purchase the text as a reference guide.

Overall, this text has been well worth the financial investment for me, my students, and my graduates.

References

Commission on Public Relations Education. (2018). *Fast forward: Foundations + future state. Educators + practitioners: The Commission on Public Relations Education 2017 report on undergraduate education*. <http://www.commissionpred.org/commission-reports/fast-forward-foundations-future-state-educators-practitioners/>