

Social Media and Public Education:
The Use of Social Media by the San Luis Obispo County Office of Education

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Abstract

The growing number of negative news stories regarding public education has presented school officials and administrators with the difficult task of developing plans to combat this negative attention and promote public education. School districts nationwide have looked to social media as a tool to communicate a positive message about public education. This paper addresses how the San Luis Obispo County Office of Education (SLOCOE) can utilize social media to target the public; in particular, those without children in public education. It is those people who school administrators are most concerned about because they may be unaware of where these publics are getting information about public education. This paper explores how social media can target these people and pave the way for a two-way conversation with local public schools.

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Chapter I: Introduction

Today's media is filled with news stories regarding public education. Most stories are negative, sensationalized stories about teachers assaulting students, cyber-bullying or inappropriate student-teacher relationships. Lately, the conversation has been about dwindling funding for public education and the increasing budget crisis. All of these stories add up to a negative public opinion of public education. According to the Phi Delta Kappa annual survey of the public opinion of public education, only 17% of those polled graded public schools nationwide in the A & B range (Bushaw & Lopez, 2011).

“The public trusts teachers – 71% report high trust and confidence in them. Yet it's unfortunate that negative news media stories of educators and public schools detract from the vast majority of everyday heroes who roll up their sleeves to support their students, schools and communities,” said Mary Bell, president of Wisconsin Education Association Council (Bushaw & Lopez, 2011).

In addition to the negative public opinion, school educators are faced with combating the change from traditional journalistic reporting to citizen journalism. In other words, anyone can be a journalist by utilizing online sources to publish their own information and opinions. Individuals are left to sift through the information to decipher the fact from the fiction. In the case of public education, those individuals could be parents or community members forming opinions from the information they are finding online.

The San Luis Obispo County Office of Education (SLOCOE) is also experiencing this trend of distrust of public education, according to County Superintendent Julian Crocker, Ph.D. (Julian D. Crocker, personal communication, July-December 2011). The California Department

of Education (CDE) reports that in San Luis Obispo County there are 34,299 children enrolled in K-12 public schools and a high school graduation rate of 89.8% (Retrieved from www.cde.ca.gov). According to the 2010 Census, those living in non-family, households that they own make-up 28.4% of the population, and those living in non-family, renter households make up 51.2% of the population (Retrieved from www.census.gov). From these statistics, it appears that most people in the San Luis Obispo County community do not have children.

The goal of SLOCOE is to target those community members without children in public schools because they appear to be the public forming opinions of public education from what appears in the media. In addition, these people do not have children coming home every day with updates, nor are they engaging in positive conversations with children about what they are doing in school. In other words, the target audience has no emotional connection to public education. SLOCOE wants to build confidence in public schools with these community members by targeting them via channels that the office is currently not utilizing: social media. Over a quarter (27.5%) of Facebook users today are between the ages of 35 and 64 (Burbary, 2011). This is an important outlet of communication that is not only being underutilized, but is non-existent at SLOCOE.

Also, it is important that SLOCOE develop a method for promoting the message that San Luis Obispo County schools are doing a good job with student achievement via a social media site. This means considering who should promote that message and how it should be presented. In addition, an overarching communications plan is necessary to establish a cohesive message, channel of communication, and outline for response to the public regarding this message. A benefit to utilizing social media is that it allows for a two-way conversation to develop among participants, which essentially is what SLOCOE needs to establish.

Chapter II: Literature Review

Negative Media Attention

Approximately 68% of the American population reports that they hear more negative stories about teachers in the media than positive ones (Bushaw & Lopez, 2011). Many, 36%, report that the biggest problem facing schools today is lack of funding (Bushaw & Lopez, 2011). Of those who were polled in the annual Phi Delta Kappa survey, they grade their local public schools significantly higher than public schools nationwide, and in addition, if they had a child in school, that child's school would be given a grade even higher than the overall for their community (Bushaw & Lopez, 2011). The difference between these grades was attributed by many (43%) of those polled to greater knowledge of immediate community and local schools (Bushaw & Lopez, 2011).

Every day the world sees new crises emerge in national and international news. Unfortunately, the school systems are not an exception to this and often are in the midst of these crises. This being said, the importance of effective crisis management communication plans is essential to public education, particularly in the United States (Gainey, 2009). School districts must prepare their schools for crises of all kinds ranging from school-related issues such discipline, or financial crises on a national level (Gainey 2009).

Trends in Social Media

The recent trend for public relations campaigns is to utilize social media as an important tactic. Basically, social media allows you to “extend the reach of your message, engage in two-way communication with publics, and listen to what your publics want” (Taylor & Kent, 2010). This trend could possibly be equated to the growing number of users in social media sites such as

Facebook. Facebook reports that from the United States, they have 94,748,820 users and 770 billion page views per month (Burbary, 2011). In addition, they report that 26.3% of users are between the ages of 26 and 34 and 14.9% are between the ages of 35 and 44 years of age (Burbary 2011). That equates to approximately 41% of all the users.

The change from traditional to social media for many communicators has also resulted in a change for public education communication plans. Media is focused on sensational news stories and social media has allowed anyone to become a journalist. Because these journalists can publish freely without inhibition of editors or codes of ethics, traditional public school communication tactics are no match (Carr, 2009). School administrators are essentially forced to plan exactly how they will communicate with the public and target potential negativity from citizen journalists. Public schools are bearing the brunt of negative publicity including state budget cuts and ineffective, overpaid teachers (Carr, 2011a). In addition, American public schools are under constant scrutiny as international standards for public education become increasingly tough, making the importance of transparent, truthful communication with the community more important than ever (Carr, 2011a).

Public Education Uses Social Media

Social media can be utilized to not only sway public opinion of public education, but develop effective communication plans that allow two-way conversations to develop between community members and school administrators, especially in the face of crisis situations when constant updates are necessary. Using social media means educators are allowing their voices to be heard to audiences that otherwise may not be reached via traditional media (Carr, 2011b). It is the elected officials within communities that are in need of hearing from public school educators

regarding how they affect the lives of not only children within their community on a daily basis, but how these children are the future of the community (Carr, 2011b). Interacting with audiences (businesses, government officials, political leaders, affluent adults, 30+) via social media builds credibility and trust (Blohm, 2009). Not only is it important that educators communicate with these officials, but it is important that the community members are receiving their information from educators themselves not through another source (Waters, 2011). Establishing a Facebook page to communicate the happenings of a school district is important in targeting public opinion of schools and discounting false stories (Waters, 2011).

To establish an effective communications plan that optimizes the use of social media, school districts must; first, listen and learn from current conversations occurring online regarding the district; second, participate in the use of social media to promote positive messages from the district; third, engage audiences by leading conversations and promoting responses (Blohm, 2009). Once established, social media sites like Facebook allow schools to post upcoming events, recruit teachers, report academic data, and receive feedback from the community (Hartstein, 2011). Reaching community members, engaging them, and earning their support is crucial. Taking into consideration community members is the most important out-of school factor in the success of public education (Dillon, 2011).

Chapter III: Methodology

Public education is covered frequently by the media, however the majority of stories appear to be negative. Everything from extreme budget cuts to bullying and irate teachers are shown on television, newspapers, the internet and other forms of national media. Meanwhile,

public educators struggle to not only provide students with quality education, but to communicate with the public to combat the negative media attention.

After a series of interviews with Crocker (Julian D. Crocker, personal communication, July-December 2011), the issue lies in a lack of communication with the public who does not have children in public education. According to Crocker, those community members do not have an emotional connection to the public schools because they do not have children coming home every day with school work, test results, letters to parents or notes from teachers. They are the target public because public educators do not know where they are receiving their information regarding public education. In order to promote public schools, administrators and educators must understand where they are receiving information and what information they have on public education. This is necessary to understanding the most effective means of communication to these community members.

For purposes of this study, a survey was constructed to identify how people collect information regarding public education and where that information comes from. In addition, the survey addressed whether or not the community uses social media and what they use social media for. This was included to determine if SLOCOE should utilize social media to target the public in disseminating their positive messages regarding public education. The survey also asked who should deliver this message to the public. This is important because it allows administrators to not only see what channel is best, but who is best to deliver the message. The following is the survey given to 19 random community members for purposes of this study:

San Luis Obispo County Office of Education Survey

Gender: _____ Age: _____
Ethnicity: _____ Occupation: _____

1.) On a scale of 0 to 5 what is your current perception of public schools in San Luis Obispo County? (0 - no opinion 1 - SLO County public schools are doing a horrible job 2 - poor job 3 - fair job 4 - good job 5 - SLO County public schools are doing an excellent job)

2.) What is the main reason you rate the schools as you do?

3.) Are the public schools in San Luis Obispo County doing a good job with student achievement in regards to:

- Test scores Y/N
- Financial management Y/N
- Perception of the quality of the teachers Y/N
- General reputation of the schools Y/N
- The notion that local graduates are well-prepared for college and careers in the 21st century Y/N

4.) If you don't already believe the public schools in San Luis Obispo County are doing a good job with student achievement, what would change your opinion?

5.) Do you believe your local public schools are doing a better job with student achievement than public schools generally in San Luis Obispo County? If yes, why? If no, why not? (feel free to use the back for more space)

6.) Do you use social media? Y/N

If yes, what do you use?

If yes, what do you use it for: social, education, informational, other: _____ (circle all that apply)

7.) Where do you get your information regarding public schools in San Luis Obispo County?

- Television
- Newspaper
- Online
- Social Media
- Word of Mouth
- Other

8.) Who would you believe when you are delivered the message, "The public schools in San Luis Obispo County are doing a good job with student achievement"? (circle all that apply)

- Parents of students who are currently in public schools
- Students in public schools
- Teachers and school staff
- School administrators
- Friends and Family
- Media

- Other

9.) How long has it been since you visited a public school in San Luis Obispo County?

- A month or less
- A year ago
- Over a year ago
- Other

10.) Do you have children or grandchildren living with you who attend public schools in San Luis Obispo County?

This survey operated as a sample for the more representative focus groups that will be conducted in the Winter 2012 quarter. Those focus groups will specifically include members of rotary clubs in each segment of San Luis Obispo County (North, San Luis Obispo, and South). The groups will be asked the same questions as appeared in the sample survey, however attendees will be asked to elaborate on their answers in order to get a more thorough understanding of how SLOCOE can communicate with these publics. Although 19 surveys does not appear to be a representative study of the entire population of San Luis Obispo County, for purposes of this project, 19 surveys was enough to get a small sampling of what administrators already believed to be the obstacle to overcome.

The results will allow SLOCOE to develop a communications plan, specifically utilizing Facebook, to target these publics. Facebook will also serve as a further informational resource and data collection tool. Once established, SLOCOE (whoever the administrator on the page may be) can examine how many people “like” the page and who is posting comments on the page wall. In addition, page administrators can use the “insights” tool on Facebook to track activity on the page and monitor when the best times are to disseminate information to the public. Because the survey and eventually the focus groups addressed who should be communicating with the

target audiences, Facebook will allow SLOCOE to use different sources to do this communicating. In other words, although the administrator on the page may be a school administrator or official, the conversation generated from the post can serve as the key communication tool and does not appear to be a school official pushing a particular agenda item.

Unfortunately, due to time constraints, reaching target audiences to survey their opinions of public education was difficult. Distributing surveys on schools campuses or anywhere else related to education was not an option because the data might not reflect the true, overall public opinion of the schools. In addition, this environment might cause survey responders to skew their responses because they are pressured by being at an educational site. In the future, the focus groups will need to be held at a neutral location where clear responses can be gathered.

Chapter IV: Data

Public Relations Campaign

The overall strategy for the SLOCOE campaign is to raise public awareness of the positive qualities of schools throughout San Luis Obispo County with the intentions of deflecting the negative, nationwide media attention given to public education. The plan is to first develop an understanding of how people view public education at a local level and how they are developing these opinions. In particular, this campaign is targeting people without children in public education. The data collected will then be used to develop a social media strategy of communicating with these publics.

Table 1:

Survey Results

<i>Question</i>	<i>Results</i>	<i>Numbers</i>
Gender	Male Female	9 10
Age	18-25 25-35 35-45 45-55 55+	3 2 2 4 8
On a scale of 0 to 5 what is your current perception of public schools in San Luis Obispo County? (0- no opinion, 1- horrible job, 2- poor job, 3- fair job, 4- good job, 5- excellent job)	0 1 2 3 4 5	2 0 0 5 10 2
Are public schools in San Luis Obispo County doing a good job with student achievement in regards to:	Test scores <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes • No Financial management <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes • No Perception of the quality of the teachers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes • No General reputation of the schools <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes • No The notion that local graduates are well-prepared for college and careers in the 21 st century <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes • No 	11 4 5 6 14 2 15 2 12 5
Do you use social media?	Yes No	11 7
How long has it been since you visited a public school in San Luis Obispo County?	A month or less A year ago Over a year ago Other	3 4 6 6
Do you have children or grandchildren living with you who attend public schools in San Luis Obispo County?	Yes No	6 11

Tactics and Tools

This communications plan will utilize several different resources for successful implementation. The first part of the campaign was developing a survey for effectively evaluating public opinion of public education. The survey development process included a series of meetings with Crocker, administrative assistant Valerie Kraskey, and Terilyn Finders, Director of Communications, Fagen Friedman & Fulfrost LLP. The meetings included discussions of hypothesized current perceptions, how to target the public and the best methods for collecting data.

In addition to the sample survey, the SLOCOE campaign will utilize focus groups for more thorough data collection. These focus groups will be held in the Winter 2012 quarter. Because the target audience is those without children in public education, the focus groups will be with rotary club members from the three geographic segments of the county. Rotary members tend to be from an older demographic, therefore less likely to have children in public education and more likely to have time to spend in a focus group. Each focus group sessions will be between forty-five minutes and an hour. Attendees will be asked the same questions as developed for the sample survey, however are encouraged to elaborate on their responses. The focus groups will be conducted by interns from Cal Poly and one person from SLOCOE to answer any public education specific questions from attendees. In addition, for research purposes, the focus groups will be filmed and reviewed for clarification on any notes taken. Ideally, each focus group will consist of 10 attendees.

From the data collected in the survey (Table 1) and the focus groups, SLOCOE will determine the best method for communication. Because of budget constraints, the method

preferred and utilized by other schools districts nationwide are social media, in particular Facebook. SLOCOE will develop a Facebook page specifically for the entire county of school districts that not only unifies the county, but highlights the positive attributes of the schools and student achievement. As discussed in the meetings with Crocker, a plan for what to post on the page and who should post it will be developed after the focus groups are conducted. However, it was suggested that the page focus on student achievement in not only academics, but the arts or sports as well. In particular, focusing on unique student achievement and how schools are fostering this is important to building a strong relationship with those without children in public education. If these publics do not have children coming home and sharing their achievements, Facebook is an outlet for sharing this information.

In addition, the Facebook page will unite schools in the county. Each school will be required to like the SLOCOE page and encouraged to partake in conversations on this page. By doing this, the public will see SLOCOE as a unified group of schools with a consistent goal of providing quality education to all students. Parents, faculty and staff will also be encouraged to “like” the Facebook page and contribute to the conversation. It is important that school administrators are not the only people communicating, considering the public may have greater trust in parents or others involved in the conversation.

Chapter V: Discussion

Summary

The SLOCOE is faced with the difficult task of promoting public education in an era of extreme budget cuts, sensationalized stories, and multiple cases of bullying situations. The media often features negative stories of public education that community members see on a daily basis.

As described by Crocker (Julian D. Crocker, personal communication, July-December 2011), the education system does not need to target parents of children currently enrolled in public schools, but rather those that do not have children in the system.

The concerning factor is that those people without children in public education are either not receiving any information about public schools or are forming an opinion based on other sources. These sources include the media, which as previously stated; often publicize negative stories, in addition to word of mouth, general perceived quality of education, or opinions based on when they had children in public education. Crucial factors to combating the negativity of public education include understanding where people get their information from and who they would trust to get information from in the future.

In order to develop an effective communications plan for SLOCOE, there had to be a basis for what information people already know, what information they should receive and how they should receive it. Initially, the focus was on developing a social media campaign to target these people, however before this could be completed the research for the above needed to be accomplished first. As previously stated, this was accomplished through the development of a survey to understand the background of the target demographic. The collection of 19 sample surveys was essential to developing focus groups for further research in Winter 2012 quarter and then the development of a communications plan. Although further information is needed to determine the effectiveness of a social media campaign in particular, the research on other school districts utilizing social media leads us to believe that it would be an effective method to target this demographic. In addition, with the increasing budget cuts, social media is an excellent way to communicate without using a lot, if any budget cuts.

Findings

Through the sample survey conducted the findings showed that 10 out of the 19 people surveyed thought that the public schools in San Luis Obispo County were doing a good job (4; on a scale of 0 to 5). In addition, people felt that the schools were doing a good job with student achievement in terms of test scores, perception of the quality of teachers, general reputation of the schools, and the notion that local graduates were prepared for college and careers. However, out of the 9 people that responded to the question regarding schools doing a good job in terms of financial management, 6 responded no. Generally, the survey found that most people were pleased with public education overall, other than in terms of finances. This was not congruent to the original hypothesis that public education in the county is negatively perceived.

The survey provided a good mix of both female and male respondents, most (12) of who were in the target demographic of people over the age of 45. More importantly, 11 out of 19 people responded that they did not have children or grandchildren in public schools, which was the essential factor in the target audience of this campaign.

Within the open-ended portion of the survey, 17 individuals responded that they either used newspapers, television, or word of mouth to receive their information regarding public education. This is an overwhelming number of respondents. The other 2 people responded that they receive their information from their students enrolled in public education in the county. Not a single individual responded that they got their information from social media, however 11 respondents said they used social media. This leads to the conclusion that social media is an underutilized resource for communication regarding public education.

Included in the survey was a question regarding who respondents would believe in terms of delivering the message that San Luis Obispo County schools are doing a good job with student achievement. This was important to establish not only the future channel of communication but the sender of the message. There were a total of 19 respondents who said that either parents of students who are currently enrolled in public schools, students in public schools, teachers and school staff or friends and family were the best option for communicators of this message. No one responded that school administrators were the best in this communicator role. This also leads to the conclusion that social media would be a good outlet for communication because it provides a two-way system for any of the above groups to deliver messages regarding the county public schools. It is important to note that only 1 person said they would believe the media as the communicator of this message. This is important in considering social media since most people received their current information from traditional media outlets, yet would not suggest the media to communicate the message regarding the good job of public schools in San Luis Obispo County.

In terms of perceiving local public schools in comparison to San Luis Obispo County schools as a whole, 8 people felt their local schools were doing a better job with student achievement.

It is important that focus groups are conducted to follow-up with this sample survey and confirm these results. Due to time constraints and the detail that went into developing the initial survey, conducting focus groups was not feasible in the 10 week time frame of this quarter. The research gathered from the suggested focus groups will further explain the current perceptions of public education and help verify the most effective communications tactics for SLOCOE to follow through with.

Conclusion

As discussed in the second chapter of this project, social media is being utilized across the United States to combat the negative media attention given to public education. In addition, it provides the community, parents, teachers, students, staff and faculty the opportunity to take part in the two-way conversation about the issues facing public education and how those can be solved.

In order to devise an effective communications plan utilizing social media for SLOCOE, this project focused on analyzing current perceptions of public education in the target audience of people without children in public schools. Developing a survey to research the current perceptions was key in implementing this project. The survey not only had to include questions regarding public perception of achievement of local schools, but how they were acquiring this knowledge and who they would trust to promote key messages regarding the quality education being provided throughout the county's school systems. In addition, it was important to ask people how involved they were in social media to understand if this would be an effective channel of communication in the future.

As previous mentioned, the survey only looked at a small portion of the population however focus groups will provide school administrators with more information on public perceptions. Although it was only a sample survey that was conducted, the information gathered was useful in assessing and confirming what school administrators from SLOCOE already knew and did not know about the public's perceptions. Most importantly, the survey confirmed that the majority of the target audience received information from a media source like newspapers or

television. Interestingly enough, the overall public opinion of public schools was high, a 4 on a scale of 0 to 5, which said that public schools were doing a good job with public education. It was thought that the public opinion might be more negative than was the actual case. However, this evidence was congruent with the national survey done by Phi Kappa Delta (Bushaw & Lopez, 2011) that stated people ranked their local schools higher than the national average.

The survey also verified that the majority of people used social media. Yet, the majority of people surveyed did not use social media to collect information on public education. This concludes that social media might be a good channel for SLOCOE to use to deliver their message. In addition, people did not recommend using the media or school administrators to deliver this message, yet they currently look to media sources (newspapers and television) to form their own opinions. This is important to note and suggests that social media would be a positive channel of communication because it would allow other voices, such as teachers, parents, etc. to present information to the public and encourage a response.

The next steps for SLOCOE are to collect data via focus groups conducted in Winter 2012 quarter. From this research, the data collected should be used to confirm the results of the survey conducted in this project. A Facebook page should be established in the Spring 2012 quarter to follow through with the communications plan. Using the results of this survey, the page should promote the message that San Luis Obispo County schools are doing a good job in terms of student achievement. The page should initially reach out to parents of children enrolled in public schools, and from there, branch out to friends of parents, staff, and faculty who may not have children in public education. Parents should be encouraged to promote the page as a source of information and an outlet for questions and concerns.

The analytics of the Facebook page should be analyzed after a couple months of the page launching to see who is using the page and how the communication can better be improved. The analytics will allow SLOCOE to see who is using the page and when peak usage is. This is essential to understanding when key messages should be promoted via Facebook and to predict who might respond and how they will respond. Because Facebook is a free service, it will allow SLOCOE to develop a communications channel without using monetary resources that may not exist. This reiterates the importance of public relations and communications in public education, especially during an era of negativity surrounding public schools.

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