Higher education and public communication campaigns:

The role of social media in promoting sustainability

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Universities can play a leadership role as agents of sustainable development (James & Card, 2012). Campus sustainability leaders can communicate procedural knowledge, prompts or reminders, issue awareness, and social motives to forge a culture of environmental sustainability (Aronson & O'Leary, 1982; De Young, 1989; 2000; Katzev & Mishima, 1992). Public communication campaigns led by these institutions of higher education now rely heavily on social media tools to achieve these objectives. Social media are an efficient and inexpensive approach to address barriers such as a lack of engagement, communication issues, and financial concerns (Horhota, Asman, Stratton, & Halfacre, 2014). Social media also allows communicators to reach the audiences in their own space, which is important because many environmental behaviors involve personal behaviors such as recycling and turning off lights (Williams, Page, & Petrosky, 2014). However, little is known about the ways in which these institutions are using social media as communication and engagement channels including the effectiveness of such applications.

This study will provide a holistic view of communication in sustainability programs. Several universities have commented that they have conducted their own internal audits, but few have made comparisons to all of the highly ranked schools in the U.S. McKenzie-Mohr, Lee Schultz, and Kotler (2012) outline several public communication in sustainability practice tips, however, these authors look to special communities like the residential or commercial sector.

This study will examine the social media practices of the top-ranked sustainable campuses in the United States through the lens of dialogic theory of public relations. Specifically, it will examine to what extent they listen and engage the audience; share relevant, valuable and actionable content; attempt to be accessible and responsive; use social media as part of a multi-channel strategy; and measure their efforts.

Literature Review

University students and faculty are more likely connected to the laptops and cellphones than the landscape. Students and recent alumni are likely to overlap with Generation-Y population, who are assumed to be the most prevalent users of social media (Kelleher & Sweetser, 2012). The potential of social media channels fuses scientists with the public, empowers students to participate in causes, and links university departments across a campus.

Social media tools facilitate two-way communication by providing direct channels of communication between organizations and the publics such as coordinating events and group meetings (Williams, Page, & Petrosky, 2014; Wright & Hinson, 2009). Dialogic communication focuses on only two-way communication, trying to distinguish between symmetrical and asymmetrical. Public relations scholars refer to symmetrical as dialogue and asymetrical as monologue. In monolugue communication, agents try to impose their beliefs or attitude onto another party. Public relations researchers believe that dialogic communication is the preferred ethical public communication strategy. Kent and Taylor (1998; 2002) posit that dialogic relationships require a point person to respond to the public with the continuous dissemination of useful, interactive, and understandable information for multiple publics. Dialogue rests on a willingness to

continue the conversation beyond the goal of swaying opinion. Such an approach could prove effective in generating future protectors of the environment. The dialogic theory of public relations will be used to guide the analysis of interview transcriptions and extraction of themes described below.

Method

This study is based on qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews (Schostak, 2005). Interviewees consisted of sustainability communication leaders from the top-ranked universities. Interviewees were asked about the social media efforts of their organization, how their were managed and measured, and the unit's goals, successes, and challenges.

Twenty-five schools were identified as being the top leaders in campus sustainability according to key ranking systems. According to an article Higher Ed Sustainability Ratings, Rankings & Reviews (Greener U, 2010), there were ten ranking systems identified as being those of importance. From the ten ranking systems, six were used in this current analysis because these six were timely and outline the key criteria[1] for their ranking system. Among the six ranking systems a cross analysis of the top schools isolated the top 25 schools.

Leaders of the sustainability offices that were found to be knowledgeable about communication strategies were either directors or communication coordinators for the units. At this time, we have conducted sixteen interviews with a total of fourteen

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[1] Curriculum, research, campus engagement, public engagement, air and climate, buildings, dining services, energy, transportation, waster, water, coordination, planning and governance, and health, wellbeing and work.

universities (ten public schools and four private schools). The interview process is expected to be complete by December 2014.

Results

Based on surface interviewer observations at this point, their social media presence appears to be limited to Twitter and Facebook. Initial results show the main audience is the campus students, faculty, and staff. These targets, however, were depended on the event, campaign, or initiative for each individual university. Social media messages varied from event promotions to sustainability tips. With the exception of one school, most of the social media efforts were left to a single person, usually an undergraduate intern. As for a timeline on their social media practices, once a day to once a week was generally sufficient for keeping a social media presence, according to the sustainability offices. Even with the one school that had set rules for social media practices, the measure of successful social media practices was limited or not checked at all. Some schools would set a goal of X number of followers, but in general, social media was considered a supplementary communication resource. Many of the directors or communication coordinators perceived themselves as not literate on social media communication, and they felt that the interns were better qualified on how to communicate to their followers. The initial results may be partially explained by leadership being concerned with addressing overarching goals such as making structural and technological improvements to buildings handed down by either university officials or by official programs rather than relying on the campus population to help address sustainability issues.

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