

CATEGORY:

ONLINE REPUTATION MANAGEMENT

DIVISION: ACADEMIC**CATEGORY: ONLINE REPUTATION MANAGEMENT****GEORGIA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY****PROBLEM OR CHALLENGE TO BE ADDRESSED**

Social media is a new and unfamiliar territory for many companies and institutions. It is growing so quickly and taking on so many new forms that many organizations are at a loss to understand its present use and future possibilities.

Georgia Institute of Technology (GT) found itself in just that position. Its communications department was being pressured to dive into social media, but it needed data before it could decide what form that “plunge” would take. With too many options, and a limited budget, it needed to understand which best (and worst) practices were in the educational environment.

GT’s Communications Department, therefore, established a plan to conduct primary research to determine social media benchmarks for itself and four of its peer institutions in YouTube, Facebook, External and Internal Blogs, and Social Bookmarking Sites.

Note: The data from this study was collected from 2007 to 2008, but it is reported in 2009 as a result of GT recently implementing the given recommendations.

Establishing the fact that social media had become a relevant communications tool was not difficult for Georgia Tech to do in the face of overwhelming evidence. Earlier research had shown that social media is an important tool for academic admissions departments and, in many cases, is more commonly used in academia than in the corporate world (Barnes & Mattson, *The Game Has Changed: College Admissions Outpace Corporations in Embracing Social Media*). In this case, 88 percent of responding admissions departments said that social media was Very Important or Somewhat Important to their marketing/recruitment strategy. Over 61 percent said that they used social media. In particular, 33 percent used blogs, 29 percent used social networking, and 19 percent used video.

The issue Georgia Tech wanted to address was the who, what, where, when, why and how of social media with regards to its institution and four other peer institutions. The questions that needed to be answered were:

1. What were the best institutions doing in blogs, YouTube, Facebook and social bookmarking sites?

2. What issues were hot, and how were the institutions being positioned in consumer-generated media?
3. Who is discussing Georgia Tech in social media (students, faculty, administration, alumni, etc.)?
4. What types of social media are being used most (blogs, videos, aggregators, etc.)?
5. Where is Georgia Tech being mentioned with respect to its competitors?
6. When and why is Georgia Tech being mentioned?
7. And lastly, what is the tone of the discussion (positive, neutral, or negative)?

Addressing those questions through a benchmark study would allow Georgia Tech to clearly see the breadth and potential impact of social media on its institution and its peer's institutions as well.

As is true with all of the nation's premier educational institutions, Georgia Tech has a broad range of target audiences. Their benchmark study, therefore, had to examine what was being seen by students, prospective students, student's parents, alumni, government grantors, faculty, staff, media outlets, and business partners. By measuring such a wide audience, Georgia Tech would allow itself the opportunity to see the "big picture" with regards to social media and then, based on those results; they would have the option of paring the audience down in the future and focusing more narrowly on specific areas of interest.

SOLUTION/TOOLS USED/RESULTS

With the above concerns in mind, KDPaine & Partners designed a research program for Georgia Tech. The following major goals were decided upon:

1. Determine specifically what presence and activity Georgia Tech and its peer institutions had in social media
2. Advise Georgia Tech on what it should be doing in social media. What changes should it make to its present programs, and/or what new programs should it add
3. Set benchmarks for Georgia Tech to judge its results by after it implements its new social media program(s)

Goal #1: Determine specifically what presence and activity Georgia Tech and its peer institutions had in social media

Step 1: Data Collection

The first step in helping Georgia Tech achieve its goal of understanding social media was to develop a standardization of collection techniques for Georgia Tech and its competitors (competitive institutions will not be named per the client's request). To best achieve these goals, it was decided to observe and explore a predefined range of social media channels for Georgia Tech as well as a small group of peer academic institutions over a three month benchmark period. Typical patterns of traffic and usage could then be determined and used as a starting point for understanding where the institutions stood with respect to this new media. For budget reasons, and to make the study comparable to their traditional media research, any discussion of sports was excluded from the study.

Step 2: Standardizing Terms

The second step of the plan was developing a standardization of terms, conversation types, and content types. At the outset of the study, KDPaine & Partners established a standard set of definitions to describe the conversation and media types that people use in social media. Ultimately, a final list of 27 conversation types and 19 video types was developed and used for coding purposes to give insights into what people were talking about through the social media channels.

Step 3: Standardizing Qualitative Data

As with any content analysis project, we also needed to establish standardized definitions of tone, positioning, and visibility. By establishing these metrics, Georgia Tech would be able to see just how it and its peer institutions were being mentioned in social media as well as being able to measure how many people would potentially be seeing these messages; whether for good or bad.

Step 4: Establishing Benchmarks

The fourth and final step of developing Georgia Tech's plan included devising definitions of benchmarks and picking a final list of peer institutions to compare with Georgia Tech. Having benchmarks set from the beginning was important for developing a foundation for Georgia Tech to work from and base future goals and projects off of. An important part of defining where Georgia Tech stands in the world of social media was comparing it to similar peers. By doing this Georgia Tech could not only measure its success against itself, but against similar institutions as well.

Collection techniques were developed by testing and finalizing a master list of search terms that included all possible social media mentions of Georgia Tech and its peers. A number of stipulations were attached to ensure that items being tracked were related to the institutions academically.

Collection techniques also involved selecting which media types would be tracked. We went with the four most popular formats at the time of this study, we selected blogs (external and institutional), video sharing (YouTube), social networking (Facebook), and social bookmarking sites (Digg, Fark, Reddit, etc.).

The following social media channels were observed:

External blogs

Institutional blogs produced by peer institutions

YouTube videos

Facebook group pages (Broken down, this was 405 network discussion posts, 53 freshman group discussion posts, and a sample of 353 popular topics).

Note: KDPaine & Partners did not look at any student profiles or retain names of any individual students. All items examined were available to any user with a Facebook account.

Social bookmarking sites, including Digg, Fark, Newsvine, Reddit, Slashdot, and del.icio.us.

Data was gathered for a 30-day period between September and November of 2007, and included all references to Georgia Tech and the four peer institutions. To ensure comparability and a manageable data set, content related to athletics was not included. To allow context comparisons, back content for discussion volume was collected for Facebook groups from January to November 2007.

Developing conversation types was important for understanding what people are using social media for, in this case, when discussing Universities. The conversation types were developed after extensive research into user conversations. Types were grouped and defined multiple times until we came up with this final list:

1. Acknowledging receipt of information
2. Advertising something

3. Answering a question
4. Asking a question
5. Augmenting a previous post
6. Calling for action
7. Disclosing personal information
8. Distributing media
9. Expressing agreement
10. Expressing criticism
11. Expressing support
12. Expressing surprise
13. Giving a heads up
14. Responding to criticism
15. Giving a shout-out
16. Making a joke
17. Making a suggestion
18. Making an observation
19. Offering a greeting
20. Offering an opinion
21. Putting out a wanted ad
22. Rallying support
23. Recruiting people
24. Showing dismay

25. Soliciting comments

26. Soliciting help

27. Starting a poll

Additionally, we identified 19 Types of YouTube Video content:

1. Advertisement
2. Animation
3. Demonstration
4. Event/Performance
5. Fiction
6. Film
7. Home Video
8. Instructional Video
9. Interview
10. Lecture
11. Montage
12. Music Video
13. News Broadcast
14. Promotional Video
15. Sightseeing/Tour
16. Slide show
17. Speech

18. Television Show

19. Video Log

The third step of our plan involved standardizing and defining qualitative data for coding purposes. We wanted to define tone so we could know not just what people were saying about the institutions, but how they were saying it. We defined tone as follows:

Positive — You are more likely to think the school is a good place to learn at, do research at, send a child for education, work at, or donate money to.

Neutral — The article doesn't give you enough information to feel either way, or it gives information that is both positive and negative, or you feel you would need more information before you could make a decision.

Negative — You are less likely to think the school is a good place to learn at, do research at, send a child for education, work at, or donate money to.

In addition to tonality, we also characterized each item (post, comment, Facebook thread, and video) as either high visibility or low visibility depending upon where in the item the brand was mentioned. Tracking this metric would allow Georgia Tech to combine what people are saying, how they are saying it, and the likelihood of these mentions being read or seen by others. The idea behind this is that the more prominent a brand mention is in an item, the greater likelihood of a reader/viewer seeing and remembering it.

Additionally, we examined whether each item contained one or more of the institution's key messages, what subjects were discussed, which departments or colleges were mentioned, and how each item positioned the institution on key issues.

The process of picking peer institutions as competitors consisted of acquiring a list of university rankings, making a list of factors including student rivals, faculty size, grants received, student body size, and academic focus. Then all of these factors were compared and paired down until the final list of four peer institutions was reached.

— Establishing consistent collection methodologies was a challenge, particularly with Facebook and Social Bookmarking items. To deliver Georgia Tech with relevant findings as well as methods that would be usable over time, we spent many hours developing coding categories for what we would track from media, such as Facebook and Social Bookmarking. Recording

activity on these sites wasn't merely recording stories and related comments like a typical blog. We had to understand and define entirely new terms such as walls, discussion threads, tags, and discussion boards, among others. Certain media types have different names for the same things while others offer options that are exclusive to that media type. Recognizing, grouping, and defining all of these metrics provided a large obstacle that was overcome through constant research and developing and testing definitions, categories, and coding results.

Another obstacle was simply handling the large amounts of mentions found for each school. Social media has been gaining more and more popularity in recent years, which in this case, meant working with thousands of mentions in various media. To overcome this issue we limited coded items to only those related to the schools in the academic sense; no sports related mentions, no obituaries, no wedding announcements, etc. This still left us with thousands of items to code and organize each month, so we used a dashboard that allowed us to organize mass amounts of data and conduct data analysis across all variables.

—At the time of this study we weren't satisfied with the accuracy of any third party content providers. To assure the most accurate sample and population according to our search parameters, we created in-house search indices and scripts from which we gathered all our items to be coded.

The methodology for selecting which blogs that we took relevant mentions from was created in-house. A blog index was created based on relevant topics, blog authority, and blog readership. Blogs were categorized by focus area, which included, engineering, general interest, higher education, mainstream media, science, special focus, and technology. Based on the above criteria, we came up with a total of 50 external blogs and 114 institutional blogs. Articles were pulled manually from the selected blogs and manually imported into a dashboard where readers then coded them.

For gathering Facebook, YouTube, and Social Bookmarking items, we created in-house scripts that gathered all mentions (based on our predefined keywords) and entered them directly into our dashboard to be coded by the readers. The search terms and stipulations we applied to blogs also applied to these media as well i.e., we only looked at academic mentions and excluded sports, obituaries, wedding, and other mentions deemed off topic.

From start to finish, the program was broken down as follows: Two senior members of Georgia Techs communications/marketing team, CEO of KDPaine & Partners, LLC, KDPaine Director of Research, and the KDPaine Education team leader, all worked together in determining goals, methodology, and the timeline for the project. Once

final goals and the project vision were developed, our Director of Research and Education team leader finalized coding instructions. Once instructions were completed the Education team leader conducted training on test items for readers until they reached the minimum reliability requirements for all major variables. From there, our Director of Research and Education team leader determined and acquired the desired population and sample sizes. Once the desired sample was achieved and coders trained, official reading began with intercoder reliability tests being administered intermittently to assure accuracy.

Every month, results were compiled and reported on to set a benchmark and to look at over time. Team meetings were held regularly between Georgia Tech and KDPaine to discuss the efficacy of the methodology and the ensuing results.

Blog Findings

Blogs combined for the second highest number of applicable items (595). Over all the external blogs (those not hosted by an institution) studied, the average number of comments per post was 13. Past research with similar institutions showed a median of about 3 comments per post, which was a good benchmark. The fact that this study achieved an average of 13 comments per post indicates very high levels of engagement between the institutions and their audience. Furthermore, if the topic was controversial, a post got as many as 35 comments. After 3 days most comments were made, and after 14 days there would almost definitely be no additional comments.

One of the most significant learnings was that when viewed from the perspective of “engagement” — as defined by the ratio of posts to comments, Georgia Tech performed far better than its peers. So while it may not have had the volume of coverage, what it was getting out there was far more engaging to the readers. The assumption is that greater engagement leads to greater outcomes, and future studies will test this hypothesis.

For institutional blogs (hosted on the domains of an institution, like gatech.edu, for instance), we found that there was an average of three comments per post, a much lower average than the external blogs. On the high end, one peer institution averaged 5 comments, and on the low end, one institution averaged zero comments; GT was in the middle with an average of 2. Institutional blogs, as presently constituted, clearly do not encourage engagement like the external blogs do. Among the internal blogs, we also found that roughly 2 out of 5 postings included at least one key message that the institution desired to convey. Note that this level of message communication is about what one would expect for articles in traditional media. This is a counterintuitive result; the institutions are writing their own blog articles, so we would expect a somewhat higher level of message communication for

the blogs than for traditional media. (GT has suggested that this result is likely due to its desire to generate content that is less calculated, less markety, and more authentic). Thus a good benchmark for message inclusion in articles in internal blogs is at least 2 out of 5.

Social Bookmarking Findings

As for social bookmarking, the third most popular medium (391 items), we found a rough median of one submitted item every other day, with a lot of variance between schools. The platform of social media also lent itself to relatively high levels of engagement among all schools. The average number of comments received among all schools was 59, indicating high engagement among readers. Institutions with the most positive mentions on social bookmarking sites generally resulted from innovations in technology and positive changes in academic procedures, such as announcing class materials being hosted online.

Another interesting finding showed social bookmarking sites are subject to higher content turnover rates than traditional media, which reduces the window of time for managing potentially harmful situations on those sites. On numerous occasions, negative subjects appeared, rose to high engagement levels, peaked, and then died all within a matter of days. One last item of interest was that among the 6 different social bookmarking sites, the results varied drastically. Some sites had many relevant items with high engagement, while others had very few items and poor engagement. GT had very few bookmarks in relation to their peers and could benefit from monitoring sites with high activity and focus on sites with weaker activity to help generate more positive items.

YouTube Findings

The findings showed that all institutions in the study were well represented in the video-sharing medium (the most popular medium of them all with 1718 unique items) with an average of 342 videos per school. On average, each school had 5 comments per video and the average user rating for videos was 4.5 out of a possible 5 points showing that the videos were providing relatively good engagement with viewers and that the viewers liked what they were seeing. Although Georgia Tech ranked lower than its peers in overall videos, it was right at the top for videos mentioning strategic focus areas. The findings also showed the potential for greater influence as those videos that were published were nearly always positively received.

An interesting finding showed that the videos that received the most views were between 3 and 5 minutes in length. As videos became longer in length, they were less watched. Likewise, videos that were shorter in length were, on average,

noticeably less popular. This information could prove very useful for GT to maximize its exposure, as they were consistently in the bottom half of total items and in share of desirable videos.

Facebook Findings

Facebook, as a whole, had the lowest total number of items, largely due to its institution's specific audience, but it did have high engagement levels within its group pages. Less than one percent of users used network-level discussion features on Facebook. Discussions mainly occurred on walls where they were most visible to all users. By September, discussion hosted by freshman groups essentially disappeared, meaning that by May, most decisions had been made. The students discussed a variety of school related topics at the beginning of summer and those topics mostly all shifted by the start of school with nearly all freshman discussion fading out. Twenty-two percent of Facebook discussion was related to the asking and answering of questions, second only to advertising (30%). Fifty-six percent of questions on the pages went unanswered, but most unanswered questions were not related to the institution itself. And lastly, high school students accounted for eight percent of all questions with most of their questions being answered.

Institutions with many positive items generally had more videos available on or through Facebook profiles, which generated views, discussions, and comments.

Overall, because the Facebook group page audiences were largely comprised of current or prospective students, discussions were largely positive or neutral showing students' loyalty to their institutions. GT specifically had no negative mentions and was just under average for share of positive discussions.

Special Research Question #1:

What subject matter consumes the bulk of the discussions across all social media?

The data shows that the answer to this question will never be simple. Academic discussion is much more fragmented and diffuses than corporate or nonprofit discussion. University and society interests are far more diverse, and so the answer is usually, These three or four things, or, These three or four other things. It is rarely just any one subject that audiences discuss.

In general, dominant topics of discussion for each medium were:

YouTube—Students, Campus Life

External Blogs—Research, Institution News

Institutional Blogs—Campus Life (when institution related),
Science/Education (overall)

Social Bookmarking Sites—Research, Institution News

Facebook—Campus Life

Special Research Question #2:

What is the influence of traditional media?

Part of the purpose of the study was to determine the extent to which traditional media triggers social media content, or is distributed via social media channels. Although traditional media is not a full predictor of content or visibility in social media, it did make up a large portion of distributed media. On Facebook, traditional news media sites were the source of 25 percent of popular items posted to profiles. The third most common link was traditional news media sites. One third of content on social media news sites came from traditional media sources. On average, bloggers included as many as 6 links to external content in a post. Of all the links to pages on Peer#1.edu that were found in our population of external blog posts, 26 percent of them were links to content found in the newsroom. Time will tell what influence traditional media will continue to have on social media, but for right now it remains one of the driving influences among posted content.

Goal #2: Advise Georgia Tech on what it should be doing

Our recommendations to Georgia Tech Based on Overall Analysis:

1. Add tactics targeting social bookmarking sites to traditional media program plans. Learn what gets bookmarked for sites relevant to your institution and the most common sources of seeded items, and put those on your priority media lists in the hopes that you can get listed on social bookmarking sites.
2. Encourage individuals (especially faculty), rather than departments, to maintain institutional blogs.
3. Engage directly with popular external bloggers.
4. Limit engagement with Facebook to contact with group officers.
5. Focus on creating YouTube playlists of thematic content already found on the site.

Note that recommendations to focus on social bookmarking, to encourage faculty to maintain institutional blogs, and to engage with popular external bloggers are all counter to current popular practice, based on our observations. Also, focusing on thematic playlists on YouTube is something not currently being done, to our knowledge.

Goal #3: Set benchmarks by which Georgia Tech can judge results after they have implemented their social media program

KDPaine & Partners' data provided summaries of activity for both Georgia Tech and the four peer institutions. As Georgia Tech enacts new programs, it can compare itself to these benchmarks to determine if it is meeting with success compared to its past, and compared to its peers.

It is tempting to anticipate that these effects will vary with certain attributes of institutions. For instance, we might expect that smaller schools, with their more cohesive social atmospheres, might have more success with social media programming than big public and private institutions. However, we tested the social bookmarking data for effects based on size of student body, size of incoming class and price of tuition; none of which were found to have an effect. Of course, the more new programs are developed, the more new data will be available for future comparisons. What was very obvious in the data was that different institutions were trying to help to guide their social media content, though for the most part, it was organic, gritty and, well, natural. Using a horticulture analogy, we're talking about watching plants grow to figure out how we can use grafting and other techniques to get plants that we want.

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