

Understanding the Skills and Competencies Athletic Department Social Media Staff Seek in Sport Management Graduates

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Sport management academic programs can do better at preparing a graduate for a career by addressing the technology demands in the sport industry. Equally important is to weigh the skills that athletic department personnel want and need in a college graduate seeking an entry-level position in a sport communication, media relations, or sports information office. Those offices train student workers as an extension of their learning environment where they can put classroom learning to practice. The purpose of these interviews was to inform and equip sport management educators on how to best prepare students to enter the field of sport communication, specifically using social media in college athletics. Professionals indicated that students should be proficient in content creation and planning, representing an organization's brand, and social media trends across all platforms. It is important for the sport management educator to know the skills and knowledge professionals desire from students so that classroom activity can be planned accordingly.

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Numerous studies have been conducted on social media and sport (Abeza, O'Reilly, Seguin, & Nzindukiyimana, 2015) and have addressed a range of topics in this evolving segment of the sport industry. Studies have addressed best practices (Hipke & Hatchmann, 2014), content (Wallace, Wilson, & Miloch, 2011), effectiveness (Miranda, Chamorro, Rubio, & Rodriguez, 2014), fan identification and engagement (Billings, Broussard, Xu, & Xu, 2018; Hopkins, 2013; Watkins, 2014), social media policies (Sanderson, 2011), strategies for college athletic departments (O'Hallam, Morehead, & Pribesh, 2016), and ticket sales (Boatwright, 2013; Popp & McEvoy, 2014). This work has provided scholarly insight into how university athletic departments can use their social media efforts for outreach, engagement, and branding.

Osmani, Weerakkody, Hildi, and Eldabi (2019) found communication to be the top-ranked skill needed for college graduates across multiple disciplines. Prior research has found that communication skills were ranked as the most important in graduates across multiple countries and in multiple disciplines (Cerezo-Narváez, Bastante-Ceca, & Yagüe-Blanco, 2018; Jackson, 2010). Communication indeed is a desired skill for multiple industries, but this manuscript more specifically focused on the areas of media relations and sports information. In preparation for a career in the sport industry, Mathner and Martin (2012) found that sport practitioners ranked technology more important on the list of competencies than students did. Thus, an increase in technology skills taught within sport-focused academic programs can better prepare the sport management graduate for a career in the sport industry (Mathner & Martin, 2012). Equally important is to weigh the desired skills that athletic department personnel want and need in a college graduate seeking an entry-level position in a sport communication, media relations, or sports information office. Furthermore, college athletic departments that train student

workers are oftentimes an extension of their learning environment where they can put classroom learning to practice.

Athletic departments are limited in number of staff members dedicated to social media efforts, leaving students in position to inherit contributing roles and tasks (O'Hallam et al., 2016). Students, then, need to quickly become accustomed to desired skills for working in that environment. The current interviews aimed to identify the skills that university athletic social media staff members seek from sport management graduates. In turn, the purpose of these interviews was to inform and equip sport management educators on how to best prepare students to enter the field of sport communication, specifically using social media in college athletics. Petersen and Pierce (2009) found that sport industry professionals recommended that sport communication courses were the second-most desired course after field experience. Given that prior research has suggested a need for greater communication skills, these interviews have application to broader areas of pedagogy than just sport, although sport is the setting through which data were collected.

Methodology

Four professionals overseeing social media accounts for university athletic departments were interviewed. A comprehensive and dynamic ranking of athletic department Twitter accounts, based on follower counts (Tennessee Athletics, n.d.), guided the selection. From there, Oregon (ranked No. 1 at the time of data collection) was identified as the industry leader in social media. Tennessee (No. 17) and Clemson (No. 21) were identified as midranking, yet successful in achieving social media followers. Clemson was also recognized by media to be leaders due to content published on social media outlets (Johnson, 2017). James Madison University was identified using convenience sampling and provided an alternative perspective from the Football Championship Subdivision level.

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Professionals overseeing the social media accounts for each program were invited to participate in the interviews. Participants directly oversaw social media content for athletic departments at the time of data collection and were Jonathan Gantt, director of new and creative media for Clemson athletics; Kellen Hiser, assistant director of social media strategy for Tennessee athletics; Michael Prior, director of digital and social media for James Madison athletics; and Brandon Barca, director of multimedia integration for Oregon athletics. Each consented to participate and agreed to disclose their identity as a leader in the industry. Interviews were conducted using semistructured questions to allow the participants to guide the conversation and allow for flexibility of follow-up questioning if participants noted important issues that were not covered in the original questioning (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). Participants were asked about official title, years working in their current position, and years working in athletic communications. They were then asked 12 additional questions about how their office uses social media, skills sought in students, and how to educate students (see Appendix). Interviews were transcribed by both researchers. Both researchers independently analyzed transcripts and compared findings (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). Disagreements were discussed until a consensus could be reached.

Responses and Implications

The following section outlines the responses from the four professionals about their (a) social media platform of choice, (b) how to engage students and the skills they need, and (c) classroom practices that will best prepare students. Practical implications for sport management educators are included in each subsection.

Platform of Choice

Twitter was the most common platform primarily used for live updates of events and breaking news, but it was not the ideal platform for the strategies of these departments. All said their department uses Twitter the most because of its design for live updates. Barca noted that Oregon athletics posted mostly on Twitter because of the way the platform is designed to capture what happens now and encourages instant interaction. However, Barca noted, “I put more priority on what our strategy is with our Instagram account.” Professionals indicated that Instagram was more of a priority because of user demographics and its link to recruiting for athletic teams. Gantt said the target market of Clemson social media accounts includes future student-athletes, so “professionally, I think our target market of recruits, who are teenagers, (Twitter) is not the preferred platform for them.” Gantt noted that Twitter has its appropriate use for live reporting at sporting events, but, “I think Instagram is probably the more valuable platform at the moment for our target audience of recruits.” Participants noted their athletic departments had a Facebook presence, but did not identify it as part of the evolving way social media is used to reach target markets. They did not mention other platforms used consistently to reach fans.

Understanding that Twitter and Instagram are the preferred social media platforms of college athletic departments allows educators to instruct students on market trends within social media, coming directly from those working in that area. It can allow educators to design assignments and projects that require students to understand the platforms and use them appropriately. Twitter assignments focused on live tweeting and interaction with followers can be common in the sport communication classroom. However, based on participant responses, educators can emphasize

Instagram stories and posts as separate tools to enhance visual engagement with followers while also complementing messaging from other social platforms. It is recommended that educators maintain live tweeting as an assignment, but also introduce Instagram stories and posts simultaneously as one comprehensive plan in covering and/or promoting a sporting event. Such a comprehensive plan can introduce students to managing an event or weekend of events through a holistic social media lens rather than an individual lens of only Twitter or Instagram.

Student Engagement and Skills

Participants said students must gain experience representing a brand. Operating a personal social account does not equate to professional experience, so gaining repetitions of overseeing brand accounts of any size can educate the student on professionalism. Real experience, participants said, is going to prepare students for the workforce more than menial tasks in the office.

We’ve found the more responsibility and more we allow them to do creative things—videographers, photographers, social—the more we put on them to utilize their talents rather than just have them do the old duties like stuff 1,000 envelopes or fill the drink machines. We throw them straight into things. —Barca

Professionals explained that social media is unique because students can gain their own experience and take ownership of how quickly they gain it. “I assigned each student to a winter or spring sport,” said Hiser from Tennessee athletics. “Through that, it’s given them more of an opportunity to manage the day-to-day of that sport’s account. It’s given them an opportunity to get to know the roster, get to know the coaches, get to know the history of the program.” Barca added that his department spends time in training the students on enhancing their management of social media, so they are producing content and also consuming knowledge.

Topping the list of required skills is good writing, according to the participants. They noted that content creation and design are valuable lessons learned in college that can be applied in athletic communications. “There’s a heavy emphasis on people’s writing abilities,” said Prior from James Madison University. “The design side of things . . . you want someone who’s pretty well-rounded.” Gantt agreed that a well-rounded understanding of content creation would be beneficial: “Writing, photography, design, video—you don’t have to be an expert in any of those, but being a generalist so you can pick up a camera and take a good photo or do basic design, that’s becoming increasingly important.” Hiser, of Tennessee, said a general knowledge will help the student better learn the industry: “If you’ve got some idea of how these programs work, that will be able to help you communicate to those folks you’re working with who are experts in that field.”

Not surprisingly, professionals said gaining repetitions of operating an organization’s social media account on behalf of a brand is the primary experience needed for starting a career. “Any time you can go into a business environment and get reps, that’s the best way to learn,” Gantt, of Clemson, said, “You can start your own social media personal accounts or accounts that are relevant to what you’re doing professionally.” Prior also said that personal accounts do not equate to professional readiness, but they can help students gain understanding of organizational branding if they strategically create or maintain social accounts focused toward the industry. “If you get the opportunity to work with a school, a department, an organization that heavily values social media, you can gain a lot of experience there, but students can also just spend

the time on their own platforms,” Prior said. He and others advised that students should work on crafting their personal brand through social media use to show potential employers, including their own athletic communications office, that they can properly operate an organizational account.

Participant responses suggest that educators should consider emphasizing design components and quality of writing in their assessments due to the need for quality work in this area of the industry. In terms of assignments, educators could assign students to cover a particular sport or team throughout a semester, using social media platforms to inform and entertain followers. The knowledge acquired by students following one sport or team can prepare them for strategically planning how they may promote or cover a team on social media platforms in a full-time job. Furthermore, educators can encourage students to enhance their personal brand through social media with assignments that require a number of checkpoints throughout the semester. For example, a student must post on social media a specific number of times about a topic throughout the semester, reinforcing the importance of personal branding and operating on behalf of another brand under deadline-driven expectations.

Classroom Practices

The primary classroom learning technique suggested by professionals was to have students become familiar and comfortable designing a content plan to reach an identified goal. They all suggested that the classroom environment can best prepare students for their work in social media management through assignments that include deliverable products under deadline and practicing timeline management of social media engagement. Gantt suggested that students must learn how to complete a project that both entertains and informs through social media content. “They have a deliverable that hopefully can be used on one of those team accounts for an athletic program that answers the question of what is it like to be a Clemson Tiger,” Gantt said.

Hiser explained that his ideal assignment for a student preparing to work in social media would focus on that deliverable but with emphasis on designing the plan from start to finish and manage the weekly timeline of content:

I think getting familiar with the idea of a content plan is a good place to start. Look at an upcoming week in an athletic department where you’ve got five home events and practice and map out the way you would like to cover those events.

Prior also emphasized the importance of allowing a student to understand the holistic approach to a social media plan. He said placing students in a scenario where social media engagement and impressions are used for revenue purposes can reinforce the importance of their work:

Let’s try to do a campaign that’s specifically focused on sales and increased revenue. Let’s do it on season tickets and come up with an entire strategy on that and start to implement what that would look like versus a campaign that is completely about brand awareness and brand affinity and getting people more acquainted for what you stand for.

Educators can apply the advice from the participants by implementing semester-long assignments or projects that build upon previous content to mimic a comprehensive social media campaign run by the student or student groups. These types of

assignments must include strategic planning as well as incorporation of other athletic department units (e.g., development, marketing, tickets) for the student to best understand how to implement campaigns from start to finish while also establishing goals that overlap other department goals (e.g., fundraising, promotion, sales). Professors should also consider partnering with athletic department staff to cover software used in social media analytics and performance, so students have exposure on industry trends. It is important to note that students may elect not to use personal social media accounts due to privacy concerns. Therefore, the educator should consider creating course-specific accounts maintained by the professor that students can use during their time in the class, with passwords changing at semester’s end. Furthermore, professors not comfortable in their understanding of social media use for assignments may consider consultation with a university’s communication or instructional design department.

Conclusion

Professionals who oversee some of the most viewed and impactful social media accounts in college athletics suggest that a student’s education should prepare them to represent an organizational brand by managing a social media content plan. Students should be able to drive content creation—whether assigned or proactively on their own—and have a working and basic understanding of social media technical skills (e.g., video production, photography, design). These assets, according to professionals, should position the student to be proactive in the industry and possess a working knowledge of how content is created and drives engagement with followers (Abeza, O’Reilly, & Seguin, 2019). Social media engagement, then, can lead to increased involvement by fans through ticket sales, merchandise sales, and deeper connectivity (Abeza et al., 2019).

An important finding was the emphasis of social media trends and how students must be taught to decipher differences in platform purposes (e.g., Twitter for live updates and Instagram for visual engagement). Educators can use this information to craft classroom content accordingly. Another important finding from these interviews is the emphasis professionals place on social media campaign development and seeing a campaign through from start to finish. Understanding this emphasis can allow educators to challenge students to engage in campaign design, implementation, and analysis of results throughout the semester to better prepare them for taking the reins of a social media account and understanding its place within the bigger picture of an athletic department’s social media presences as well as the comprehensive engagement with fans and followers. It is important for educators to understand the desires of professionals in the industry so that classroom planning and content can best prepare students to enter the field with appropriate qualifications.

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Appendix: Interview Protocol

1. What is your official title?
2. How long have you worked in your current position?
3. How long have you worked in athletic communications?
4. What metrics do you use to measure the success of your social media campaigns?
5. Some universities now offer degrees in social media. Do you think those are necessary to work in this field?
6. What are the recommended degrees for individuals who want to work in social media?
7. There are more than 60 well-known social media platforms. How do you determine which to utilize?
8. Out of all the social media platforms, which do you use the most right now and why?
9. How do you stay current with advancements on each platform?
10. What should students do to best prepare for a career in athletic communication?
11. What essential skills are needed for students entering a career in athletic communication?
12. How do you utilize students in your department?
13. What advice would you give to students seeking your position?
14. Aside from a degree, how can students learn skills to best utilize social media?
15. If you taught a class on athletic department social media, what would be your best method or assignment to teach the students?