

Snapchat: Higher education's new key to current and prospective student engagement

Received (in revised form): 14th January, 2016



Tony Dobies

TONY DOBIES

is the social media strategist at West Virginia University. He manages the day-to-day presence on social media for the university on Facebook, LinkedIn, Pinterest and Google+. In addition, Dobies leads the conversation on campus about using social media to reach high-level goals and various audiences. Dobies has been named a *PR News Rising PR Star 30 and Under*. Prior to his social media work, he spent time as a senior writer at WVU and is an award-winning sports writer.



Candace Nelson

CANDACE NELSON

is a senior writer for University Relations/News at West Virginia University. She manages the daily operations of the university social media accounts, including Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat. In addition, Nelson writes stories, produces multimedia projects and collaborates on large marketing campaigns across the university. Nelson is an award-winning journalist and published researcher. She has her MS in journalism, BS in journalism and BA in English from West Virginia University.

Abstract

Snapchat is the fastest growing social media platform and attracts a young, high school- and college-aged audience — one crucial to higher education. While some institutions in higher education have struggled with implementing a Snapchat strategy due to its controversial reputation, difficult user interface and ever-evolving content, this mobile platform provides a great opportunity to captivate a difficult-to-reach audience. This paper details how higher education can approach Snapchat using West Virginia University's strategy to engage with prospective and current students.

Keywords

higher education; social media; Snapchat; marketing; prospective student recruitment

Tony Dobies,
West Virginia University,
48 Donley Street,
431 Marina Tower,
Morgantown,
WV 26505, USA

Tel: +1 304-293-5510;
E-mail: Anthony.Dobies@
mail.wvu.edu

Candace Nelson,
West Virginia University,
48 Donley Street,
425 Marina Tower,
Morgantown,
WV 26505, USA

Tel: +1 304-293-8031;
E-mail: Candace.Nelson@
mail.wvu.edu

INTRODUCTION

Once dismissed as a fad, Snapchat has now emerged as a necessary component of any social media portfolio in higher education. The disappearing photo and video app initially drew criticism for its potential for risqué content without any perception of consequence, although it has since evolved into a powerful storytelling device useful for brands, institutions and other organisations.¹

While Snapchat has been closely associated with inappropriate images or messages, a study that polled more than 1,600 self-identified social media users in college from around the USA found that college students primarily use Snapchat for 'creativity', 'keeping in touch' and because it is 'easier than texting'. The study found that just 2 per cent of poll respondents listed 'sexting' as their primary use of the social media app.

The study, which was commissioned by New York-based marketing company Sumpto, found that about 77 per cent of college students use Snapchat at least once a day.² In fact, it is the fastest growing social network, with around 200 million monthly active users — half of whom are daily active users. These users are sending 400 million snaps per day, which makes it one of only two platforms — the other being Twitter — where the number of posts outnumbers the number of users.³ Snapchat now gets 4 billion video views per day — tying with social media giant Facebook.⁴

Brands have taken notice of the potential of Snapchat and have invested heavily in the app — specifically through the Discover app or via sponsored selfie lenses. For example, *Cosmopolitan* is averaging 3 million viewers per day via Snapchat Discover.⁵ Snapchat is reportedly expecting to reach US\$50m in advertising revenue for 2015.⁶

Despite the significant audience available on this platform, many institutions in higher education are hesitant about jumping into the world of Snapchat. Instead, they are often deterred by the possibility of a negative response, compromising content or a nebulous situation. Colleges and universities should see this platform as an opportunity.

STARTING A SNAPCHAT

Beyond the reputation that has been generated for Snapchat, some in higher education are intimidated by the user interface of the application, which differs greatly from the social media trailblazers before it. The mobile photo and video messaging app incorporates text, selfie lenses, the ability to send money, and even daily news pieces found in the Snapchat Discover section. The best way

to understand this new user interface and learn the inner workings of the application is to dive in and get started.

Username

Snapchat is available on both Android and iOS devices. West Virginia University, like other colleges and universities, uses a combination of iPhones and iPads to help produce content for Snapchat. Once the application is downloaded on all devices, select a username that coincides with other social media channels. For example, West Virginia University uses ‘WestVirginiaU’ on Snapchat, Instagram and Twitter to build a cohesive image.

Settings

In the settings, it is not necessary to add a phone number to an account. We keep in mind that when a number is added, if anyone has that number existing in their phonebook, the name in the phonebook will show up as the username. For example, if we used the main West Virginia University number in Snapchat, anyone having that number saved in their phone under any number of names would see that saved name show up on Snapchat. Under ‘Who Can ...’ we have made sure to change ‘Send Me Snaps’ and ‘View My Story’ to ‘Everyone’. In that way, anyone who adds our username in Snapchat can send snaps and view our story. Also, run through the remaining options to activate front-facing flash, filters, replay and more.

Influential followers

We can add influential students or other organisations on campus that we may want to follow. For West Virginia University, we add students whom we are considering for ‘Takeover Tuesdays’ or other campus

leaders. We avoid adding everyone who adds us so that our feed does not become cluttered with information not necessary to the management of the account.

User interface

Snapchat's user interface differs significantly from other platforms, without any main buttons to direct users to various menus. The main screen allows us to take snaps, while moving to the screen on the left shows a list of all snaps received and sent. The screen to the right shows all recent updates — or 'stories' — from friends, in addition to live events and the Discover tab, which can be found further to the right. The Discover tab features brand-sponsored content from outlets like *Cosmopolitan*, *National Geographic*, *People*, *Daily Mail* and ESPN. If a campus has a Snapchat-run 'live' campus story, it will also appear in this area.

Geofilters

On the main screen, tap on the circle at the bottom of the image to take a photo. It is possible to use flash or alternate from the front-facing camera to the back-facing camera if necessary. Then we can choose the number of seconds for which we want the photo to live. Once we have taken the photo, we can swipe to the left or right to add any geofilters that may be available in our area. Geofilters are a filter users can add to an image that has already been taken based on location. Geofilters are a highly sought-after feature for many colleges and universities because they allow them to brand a specific location. Geofilters are only available in certain locations, surrounded by a geofence, and only users in those particular areas have access to the geofilters.

Colleges and universities are able to submit geofilters according to Snapchat's guidelines, which can be found on its website. Geofilters must be a web-optimised, transparent PNG file. They have to be 1,080 pixels wide and 1,920 pixels high. They must be under 300 kB. Snapchat does allow colleges and universities to use logos or trademarks if they are submitted by an authorised official from the school. West Virginia University has a number of geofilters, which have been used for game days or as a general campus introduction that includes iconic imagery.

Campus story versus your story

Snapchat Campus Stories are special live stories created for select colleges and universities. Snapchat users who are within the selected area can contribute to this campus story, which serves to aggregate daily campus happenings. It automatically shows up on any user's Snapchat account who has been in that area within the last 24 hours. This is separate from individual college or university Snapchat accounts, which can often cause confusion for followers. Meanwhile, any colleges or universities who have individual accounts must promote their individual Snapchat usernames so that individuals can add them as friends. West Virginia University has a campus story which is not in the university's control. To help tell the university's story, West Virginia University has its own account.

iPads

Third-party applications are prohibited under Snapchat's terms of service, which makes any graphic or pre-produced image difficult to post to Snapchat. Instead,

Snapchat requires all content to be produced within the app itself — so no previously created content can be uploaded. To manoeuvre around this requirement, West Virginia University uses a two-screen system. For any graphic or image that already exists, it is uploaded onto an iPad, and then within the Snapchat app itself onto a phone, so users can take a photo in Snapchat of the photo on the iPad. This can prove difficult with overhead lighting and screen patterns, but dark rooms and anti-reflective coating on iPads help neutralise those concerns.

Frequency

It is not necessary to post on Snapchat as often as on other platforms. Whereas Twitter requires daily updates, in West Virginia University's experience Snapchat users seem to respond well to a few updates per week. Updates on Snapchat are regarded as a pleasant surprise. So, when users see a post on Snapchat from West Virginia University, they are excited to see new content, rather than questioning the amount of activity on the account.

For a full guide on how to start a Snapchat from scratch, visit <https://support.snapchat.com/ca/getting-started>.

CROSS-PROMOTION

Once the account is created, it is then necessary to promote it. While many large social media platforms allow for a comprehensive search to find users, Snapchat requires a much more targeted approach.⁷ While users can now use a link to solicit friends, unless a user knows a specific username, it is difficult to find accounts to follow. For that reason, it is necessary to cross-promote Snapchat accounts heavily

across the other platforms that already have an established following.

Username

Publishing the institution's username in marketing and admissions materials is one way to help Snapchatters find the institution. The username can also be posted across social media platforms where an established base already exists. Snapchat users are more similar in age and interest to those on Instagram and Twitter, rather than on Facebook where the age skews much older.

Snapcode

Snapchat creates a Snapcode for every user, which can be found under the small ghost icon at the top of the screen (Figure 1). The Snapcode features a pattern of dots on a yellow background and can include an optional selfie in the centre ghost image. This Snapcode can be scanned by anyone in the Snapchat application, and it automatically takes the user to an option where he or she can add the user of that Snapcode.

Contests

Colleges and universities can use contests on already established platforms to drive traffic to Snapchat. These contests will not only increase engagement, but will also expand the audience on the new platform.

ENGAGEMENT

Building relationships is necessary to any social media presence, and a pathway to achieve that is through constant engagement. Snapchat provides colleges and universities with a much more private way to engage with prospective and current students.



FIGURE 1 WVU's Snapcode

Recruiting

Snapchat itself believes it is the ‘best way to reach 13 to 34 year-olds’, as it reports based on internal data that more than 60 per cent of US 13- to 34-year-old smartphone users use Snapchat.⁸ In addition, research conducted in 2014 showed that 77 per cent of college students use the application on a daily basis.⁹

When it comes to teens, 41 per cent use Snapchat, according to a 2015 study from Pew Research Center on teens, social media and technology; Pew surveyed 1,084 parents and 1,060 teens to come up with these results. Facebook, at 71 per cent and Instagram, at 52 per cent were the only two social media applications with more popularity.¹⁰ More specifically, 31 per cent of 13–14 year olds use the application, while a much larger 47 per cent of 15–17 years olds use it. Girls and older teens are the most likely to send snaps, as 51 per cent of girls use the app while 31 per cent of boys use it.

One great difference between some of the more popular social media platforms and Snapchat to 13–17 year olds has to do with privacy. While these teens are on Facebook more often, Pew Research shows that teens feel like they have more privacy on Snapchat. On Facebook, for example, there is a better likelihood that a teen’s parents or grandparents are there as well. On Snapchat, the chance of a user being over the age of 34 is much less likely. That privacy allows teens to be more authentic.

Since Snapchat is a mobile-only application, it is necessary to have access to a mobile device to access the application, and Pew reports that 88 per cent of American teens between 13 and 17 have access to a mobile device, and 73 per cent of those have access to a smartphone.

Due to Snapchat’s popularity with this age demographic, it makes sense for those in communications, marketing and recruiting positions throughout higher

education to attempt to use it strategically. In 2014 nearly two-thirds of high school students searching for the right college to attend used social media for research, and 70 per cent of those who did found social media to be an influencer.¹¹ In addition, 73 per cent of high school students surveyed said that a college should have a presence on social media and two-thirds said that individualised social media conversations influenced their decision on where to enrol.

One-on-one conversations

While it is difficult to guarantee that a Snapchat story or conversation will lead to an increase in admissions applications, it can help to create much better relationships with those high school students interested in an institution. Social media, as a whole, is best at brand and relationship building, as it can be used on a much more personal level than many other forms of communication. With Snapchat, the conversations can feel much more private, as they are almost entirely one-on-one. Anyone who follows a brand's Snapchat account can send it a snap unless the brand has changed its settings to disallow the feature.

When the average user sends a brand a snap, it is crucial to use that as an opportunity to start a conversation and build a relationship. In recruiting, this can be a key point in a student's investigation process into the institution. At West Virginia University, we take advantage of situations just like this; if we receive a snap from a high school student, we almost always reply. We receive questions at random from many high schoolers about student life, the admissions process, etc. Many of these answers can be found online, but we have found that giving a quick answer directly to them — without forcing them to pick up a phone or send

an e-mail — is a big positive for them. At times, our conversations with these prospective students continue over the next few minutes and can build into a much more concrete conversation through the recruiting process, with the hope that we receive snaps when they are accepted into the university, visit campus the following summer for orientation and eventually join us on campus as a student.

In addition, we have used other entry points in the recruiting process as an opportunity to reach out later via Snapchat. During recruitment events, we ask for Instagram, Snapchat and Twitter handles to give us the opportunity to follow up with the student in the future. We ask for the same information on our sign-up form for campus tours as well. Why? Well, we know that these students already have some interest in our university; otherwise they would not be at our recruitment event or taking a campus tour. With that knowledge, we feel it is feasible to reach out to these students. In the past we created templates that we personalised for each student we started conversations with and have more recently taken a more fun and less cookie-cutter approach by typing up different messages to each individual student to make the conversation feel more realistic.

Relationship building

Snapchat, more than any other platform, needs to focus on the intended audience and what it wants to see and not the content that we as a university want to push onto that audience. That can make things tough in that it is very different from other social media platforms. Snapchat is much more experiential and real compared to some of the other popular applications. There are not as many opportunities to make things look and

feel the way we want them to as we would with other communications.

It is smart to develop a personality on Snapchat that is unique and different from your other social media accounts. For us at West Virginia University, we found most success when speaking in the same way that teens speak to each other. That does not mean that we are unprofessional; rather, we are informal and conversational. For example, we would never use the word ‘hello’ and instead would use ‘hey’ or ‘hi’. In addition, we have found that using emojis in our conversations on Snapchat is a solid tactic.

Our audience on Snapchat now knows what to expect from us. Our followers are not turned off by the way we speak, and instead are drawn towards us. This helps us create those conversations and then eventually the relationships that are so important to universities across the world.

CASE STUDY: ‘ASKWVU’ SNAPCHAT Q&A

Based on our experience at West Virginia University, High schoolers are much more likely to ask a question on Snapchat

than on any other social media platform. In late 2015 we held an ‘AskWVU’ question-and-answer session on Snapchat (Figure 2), where we answered many questions from prospective students over a 12-hour period. We promoted this event on our other social media accounts that focus on this younger demographic, such as Instagram and Twitter, and gave out informational postcards to prospective students at different recruiting events leading up to the event. We estimate that our account gained nearly 1,000 followers prior to our ‘AskWVU’ Q&A session. On the day, we received more than 600 questions from prospective students, ranging from middle school to high school seniors. We tried to answer many questions directly, and others that we saw repeat often like ‘What food options are available on campus?’ or ‘Which dorm is the best?’ were answered in our Snapchat story that day. Our story had a record number of views that day, receiving upwards of 6,000 views — about 1,000 more than we had on an average story up to that point. We consider this to be our most successful social media recruitment campaign to date. It was very clear that



FIGURE 2 AskWVU Q&A session

students were more comfortable sending in questions privately instead of in a much more public setting like Facebook or Twitter. To see the 'AskWVU' Snapchat story, visit: <http://go.wvu.edu/AskWVU>.

CASE STUDY: TAKEOVER TUESDAY

At West Virginia University, nearly all of our content on Snapchat is in some way targeted towards prospective students. An example of that would be our Takeover Tuesday campaign (Figure 3), which allows a different student to run our university account for a 24-hour period every Tuesday. While we strive for as much diversity as possible in gender, race, discipline, etc, it is more important to us that the student who takes over the account is not only excited about the opportunity, but will post engaging content and interact as much as possible over that 24-hour period. Because the students are taking over our university Snapchat account, we have them sign a contract to make sure that they fully understand the responsibility. When these

students take over the account, they take Snapchat followers through a day in their life — into the classroom, the extracurricular activities, their dorm rooms, etc. In addition, they usually have the opportunity to answer questions throughout the day focused on their majors or general campus life. Many of the students who have participated in Takeover Tuesday said they received numerous questions from prospective students attempting to get a different view of campus from somebody not necessarily affiliated with it.

We have found that many universities fear giving university-wide accounts over to students. To us, however, we see this as an opportunity, not a risk. Our students provide an opportunity to see life through their eyes in a way we could otherwise never reproduce, and that is important when we are looking for real-life experiences on campus to showcase to our prospective students. They are our greatest assets, and letting them take over our Snapchat has allowed us to show off many different perspectives and increase the number of WVU voices they hear from on a weekly basis.



FIGURE 3 Takeover Tuesday

CONCLUSIONS

Social media is in a constant state of flux, which can make what we do as communicators and marketers much more difficult. It should be higher education's primary objective to keep up with our students when it comes to technology like this, though. Snapchat is a prime example.

To students, Snapchat is cool and different — just what we strive to be as an institution. Snapchat is the fastest growing social media platform and is adapting better to its audience than any other more-established applications.

Snapchat is not like every other social media platform. It does not conform easily to the demands of higher education as Facebook or Twitter do. Instead, we have to adapt our strategies for the application. It sets a strong precedent for the future of social media, though, as colleges and universities should already be focusing on messages our audiences want and not what we want to push onto them.

Snapchat is an underutilised tool across the world in higher education, but it can be one of the greatest recruiting tools we have available right now. Take advantage of it, and do not fear failure. Despite some of the risks Snapchat poses, the rewards are plentiful.

REFERENCES

- (1) Poltash, N. (2013) 'Snapchat and sexting: A snapshot of baring your bare essentials', *Richmond Journal of Law & Technology*, Vol. 19, No. 4, available at: <http://jolt.richmond.edu/v19i4/article14.pdf> (accessed 4th November, 2015).
- (2) Wagner, K. (2014) 'Study finds 77% of college students use Snapchat daily', *Mashable.com*, 24th February, available at: <http://mashable.com/2014/02/24/snapchat-study-college-students> (accessed at 13th November, 2015).
- (3) Morrison, K. (2015) 'Snapchat is the fastest growing social network (infographic)', *SocialTimes*, 28th July, available at: <http://www.adweek.com/socialtimes/snapchat-is-the-fastest-growing-social-network-infographic/624116> (accessed 13th November, 2015).
- (4) Rodriguez, S. (2015) 'Snapchat now gets 4 billion video views per day and is challenging Facebook video', *Business Insider*, 2nd September, available at: <http://www.businessinsider.com/snapchat-gets-4-billion-video-views-per-day-2015-9> (accessed 22nd November, 2015).
- (5) Sloane, G. (2015) 'Cosmo is getting 3 million readers a day on Snapchat Discover', *Digiday*, 14th October, available at: <http://digiday.com/platforms/cosmo-says-getting-3-million-readers-snapchat-discover/> (accessed 30th November, 2015).
- (6) Wagner, K. (2015) 'Snapchat revenue could hit \$50 million this year — but it still needs a CFO', *recode.net*, 31st July, available at: <http://recode.net/2015/07/31/snapchat-revenues-50-million-still-needs-cfo/> (accessed 13th November, 2015).
- (7) Adweek (2015) 'Cross-promotion is key on Snapchat', *SocialTimes*, 17th July, available at: <http://www.adweek.com/socialtimes/cross-promotion-is-key-on-snapchat/623608> (accessed 2nd December, 2015).
- (8) Snapchat (2015) 'Ads', available at: <https://www.snapchat.com/ads> (accessed 4th November, 2015).
- (9) *Ibid.*, Ref. 2 above.
- (10) Lenhart, A. (2015) 'Teens, social media & technology overview 2015', *PewResearchCenter*, 9th April, available at: <http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/04/09/teens-social-media-technology-2015/> (accessed 9th November, 2015).
- (11) Uiversity (2014) 'Digital, social, mobile available: The 2014 social admissions report', available at: <http://www.uiversity.com/downloads/presentations/2014-Social-Admissions-Report-Webinar.pdf> (accessed 17th November, 2015).