

# Jumping on the Social Media Bandwagon

*Social media is quickly becoming the go-to place to give and get information.*

By Lori Blakeslee

Should your school district jump on the social media bandwagon? Yes! Social media provide a low-cost way to communicate school district priorities, influence decision makers, and tell your story without filters. Equally important, social media are where your constituents are spending a lot of their time.

With more than 800 million members, Facebook is an ideal way to communicate and interact with your audiences. Every day, these millions of people connect with friends, families, organizations, and brands on Facebook. With a simple click of the “like” button on your district’s Facebook page, your stakeholders can stay up-to-date with district news.

Trailing Facebook is Twitter with more than 300 million users. Twitter is a microblog that allows its members to communicate with “followers” in 140 characters or fewer. They can share photos and videos in addition to text. It’s a great way to direct followers to content on the district Website.

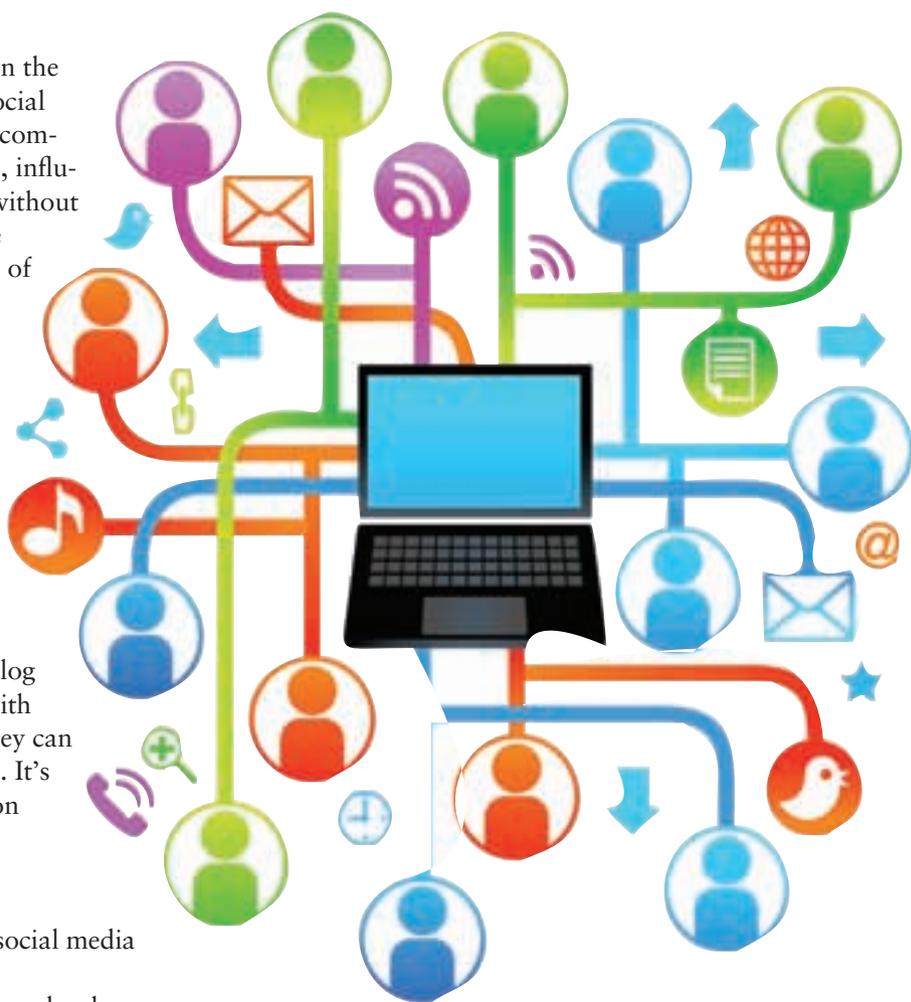
## Listen, Engage, and Respond

Your school district should be using these social media tools for three important reasons:

- To listen to what is being said about your school district
- To inform and engage your constituents (parents, taxpayers, the business community, etc.)
- To respond.

**Listen.** People use social media to share their experiences, opinions, and concerns. If you are not listening in on these cyberconversations, you might be unaware of negative rumors or comments that are gaining a life of their own in your district or in the larger community. There are a few simple ways to find out what is being said:

- **Google Alerts** are emails that are sent to you when Google finds content that includes specific words or phrases you have identified. For example, you can set a Google Alert for your school district name. Then, whenever Google finds the school district name mentioned in a blog, tweet, news story, and so forth, you will receive an email alerting you. You can control how often you receive email alerts.
- **HootSuite and TweetDeck** are applications that help you manage the Twitter accounts you follow. Both



allow you to set up multiple searches so you can find out if your school district, superintendent, or school board is being discussed by Twitter users.

- **Youropenbook.org** is a search engine that will search public Facebook profiles for an identified phrase.

**Inform and Engage.** Before sharing information through social media tools, it is important to develop a communications strategy. How do social media fit into your overall communication plan? How can they be used to enhance communication tools already used by the school district? What do you want to accomplish by using social media tools? Here are some goals you may want to accomplish using Facebook and Twitter:

- Share school district news, including accomplishments and upcoming events.
- Increase awareness of your school district.
- Manage your district's reputation.
- Generate referendum support.
- Recruit students and staff.
- Solicit feedback from the community.

In social media, content is king. The following is just a brief list of the content you may wish to share:

- Celebrations of student work
- Field trips
- Experiential learning activities
- Assemblies and school-wide celebrations
- Community meetings
- Sporting events
- Plays, concerts, and other performances
- Students, staff, or board member recognition

Once you get comfortable with social media, you may wish to move beyond informing to engaging your followers. Consider sharing the following information:

- Topics discussed at school board meetings.
- An analysis of school data, such as test scores and attendance rates.
- New class offerings or changes in curriculum.
- Data about the school district's budget. For example, post the amount your school district spent first quarter on fuel for busing versus anticipated costs; describe a change in process that saved money or energy efficiencies you may have implemented; help your community understand the scale of your purchases—how many cartons of milk your students drink in a school year; how many rolls of toilet paper are purchased; how many gallons of fuel are needed to run the buses.

**Respond.** During a crisis, it is imperative that a school district communicate. With mobile technology, rumors and inaccurate information spread quickly. Although school districts can use their Websites to update information, it does not have the same immediacy or reach as communicating by Twitter or Facebook.

One of the unique strengths of social media is the ability to connect into other social networks. This ability

enables your message to spread rapidly, minimizing damage to your district's reputation and possibly enhancing it as you show yourself to be transparent and nimble in a time of crisis.

## Finding Fans and Followers

Although the “build it and they will come” concept might have worked for Kevin Costner in *Field of Dreams*, your school district needs to make an effort to reach out to find fans and followers. The following suggestions can help you increase your fans and followers beyond the usual active parents and community members:

- Cross market. Inform your Facebook fans that you are on Twitter and vice versa.
- Post your Facebook page on other Facebook pages that might have an audience that would be interested in your school district, such as your local municipality's page, a local business association's page, or the Facebook pages of local community organizations, such as the YMCA and YWCA, Big Brothers and Big Sisters, sports groups, and 4-H clubs. Don't forget to ask people to “like” your page.
- If you are tweeting, build your following by following others; Twitter will provide you with recommended people and organizations.
- Use hashtags in your tweets. Many Twitter users set up search columns in applications like HootSuite or TweetDeck based on specific hashtags.
- Retweet others' tweets.
- Add a Twitter and Facebook widget to your school district's Website or blog. By doing so, people can see in advance what you are sharing on Twitter and can see which of their friends “like” your Facebook page.
- Add the district Twitter and Facebook URLs to your Email signature.

## Keeping Followers Interested and Looking for More

Once you've got their attention, you need to keep your constituents engaged.

- **Video.** Whether its Twitter or Facebook, it is very easy to share video. All you need is an inexpensive digital video camera. With some easy and free video-editing software, such as Windows Movie Maker, you can share messages from the superintendent and capture activities and events to share with your public.
- **Photos.** Although you might immediately think about sharing photos of students (which always make for great viewing as long as the district has written releases from parents), how about posting photos that document building construction or maintenance projects, public engagement meetings, and student artwork and projects?

- **Polls.** Facebook provides an opportunity for your school district to seek input. If you are concerned about negative responses, you could begin with a series of low-risk questions: What is your child's favorite school lunch? What was your student's favorite school activity during homecoming week?
- **Opportunities for two-way communication.** For example, on Facebook, you could celebrate American Education Week and ask followers to post thank-you messages to a favorite teacher or district employee. On Twitter, you could host a TweetChat or a Tweetup with the superintendent.

Finally, you can keep your social media efforts fresh by revisiting your school district's communication plan. The following are some questions to ask:

- How often are we communicating using social media tools?
- What information are we sharing?

- Have we checked our Facebook Insights to get a sense of what content is of most interest to fans?
- Are we monitoring the tweets that are retweeted to understand what information is viewed as valuable and worth sharing?
- Have we opened our Facebook page to posts and comments from fans?
- Are we using the social media tools that reach our school district's audience?
- Are we responding to comments made on our Facebook page?

Keeping social media fresh requires constant vigilance. Social media sites are continually evolving as we try to determine how best to be "social."

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