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Something Blue
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The Center for Sustainable Systems (CSS) within the University of Michigan School for Environment and Sustainability encourages interdisciplinary and environmental research with the overarching goal of improving man-made systems to better meet human needs while also becoming more sustainable (Center for Sustainable Systems, css.umich.edu).

The CSS currently relies on few outlets to present information about the center, as well as news and updates. These platforms include their website, LinkedIn, and once-per-semester newsletter. The center would like to improve its communication with the public, current/perspective students, and alumni by creating a strategy for utilizing increased social media platforms to convey important information.

This report will primarily focus on the role of social networking sites in the college recruiting process and college acceptance/decision progression. It will also address the existence of the CSS competing programs and how the CSS should behave online.

The University of Michigan was founded in Detroit, Michigan in 1817 as the first public university of the Northwest Territories (The Regents of the University of Michigan, 2017). Over the years, it has relocated to Ann Arbor, Michigan, grown into a well-known and accredited university, and has become home to 19 different schools and colleges (The University of Michigan, 2017) that serve over 44,000 graduate and undergraduate students (Office of the Registrar, 2016). The university's environmental studies school, the School for Environment and Sustainability (SEAS) was originally founded as a forestry and conservation school in 1927 (School for Environment and Sustainability, seas.umich.edu). Since then, the school, known for many years as the School of Natural Resources and Environment, has been molded into many forms to better fit the needs of the environment at the time. As of July 1, 2017, SEAS adopted its new name with the hope of better tackling modern climate issues involving the goal towards achieving a more sustainable human lifestyle for the immediate and general public (School for Environment and Sustainability, 2017). Currently, SEAS is home to eight different research centers and institutes (School for Environment and Sustainability, seas.umich.edu), each with a different environmental goal and focus. Our client for the semester in the School of Information course, Contextual Inquiry and Consulting Foundations, is the UM SEAS Center for Sustainable Systems (CSS).

The primary goal of CSS is to research innovative ways to adequately meet human needs through sustainable measures (Center for Sustainable Systems, css.umich.edu). This semester, the CSS research and communication teams would like the help of "Something Blue," our class group team name, to generate an instructional social media strategy that properly prioritizes which types of information should be

distributed to which audience, and how to do so most effectively. This background research report will focus on the CSS's curiosity with how the center might begin to use their Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and potentially Instagram accounts to recruit new students to center, and to SEAS as a whole. Furthermore, the CSS is aware of the competing environmental studies schools and research centers at other universities, and therefore wants to make sure they are keeping up with best practices in order to get noticed by perspective students. **With the end goal to best serve the CSS this semester, this research report will analyze the use of social media in college recruiting, examine social media's role in a prospective student's decision process, and finally compare how the CSS's current overall strategy contests with those of their competitors.**

Worldwide, there are currently 2.46 billion users on social networking sites (SNS) as of 2017, with a projected 3.02 billion users by the year 2021 (eMarketer, 2017). The most-popular site is Facebook, followed by YouTube and WhatsApp (Keipos, 2017). When it comes to teenagers and young adults in the United States, however, the priority list shifts slightly, with Snapchat as the most widely used platform, followed by Facebook, Instagram, and then Twitter (MarketingCharts, 2017). It is important for the CSS to understand these demographics so that the system can better shape their content and choose their platforms in order to target these young adults who are looking for colleges. As social media becomes an increasingly large and significant aspect of our everyday lives, especially in those of young adults and teenagers, colleges and universities have learned to keep up with the online trends in order to appeal to these prospective students. According to researchers at the University of Massachusetts

Dartmouth (2013), “the adoption of social media by colleges and universities is being driven by their recognition of the increasingly important role of social media in recruiting students ... beyond this, some schools say they are spending less on printing (30%), newspaper ads (23%), television (17%) and radio (16%) as a result of their increased online presence” (Barnes & Lescault, 2013, pp. 5). Furthermore, though email still remains the most popular way to recruit students, surveys conducted by Ruffalo Noel Levitz (2015) showed that social media was the third most-used communication method of four-year private higher education institutions. As this use and integration of social media by universities increases, these organizations may begin to incorporate essential strategies into their general communication and recruitment plans. In support of this, Reynol Junco, prominent researcher of social media use by colleges and universities, stresses the importance of understanding how to communicate with prospective students of high-school age via SNS to properly achieve success and recruit/maintain as an institution by reaching them on a personal level given their transitional period of life (Junco, 2014).

[High-school students’ social media] use acts as a bridge between the uncertain feelings of transition and solidification of social and academic integration at their college or university. Because such a large percentage of students use social media and because their social media use is related to academic and psychosocial outcomes, it behooves student affairs professionals to understand how they can use technologies in beneficial ways (Junco, 2014, pp. 51).

Given the advice, guidance, and findings from these sources, it is clear that the CSS should have an active social media presence in order to publicize their events and news that prospective SEAS students might be interested in.

When it comes to social media use and SNS, it is not only important to understand in what ways to use SNS effectively, but also how an organization's target audience behaves and interacts on each site. According to researchers from the University of Michigan, Michigan State, and the University of Oxford (2016), social media platforms, specifically Facebook, play a significantly influential role in helping first-generation college students find and commit to schools based on their previously-established connections (Jeon et al., 2016).

Our findings are positive regarding the potential of social media interventions for remediating unequal access to postsecondary education. Social media apps that can provide similar affordances may serve as a useful tool for less resourced individuals such as first-generation students by allowing them to access resources hidden in their network (Jeon et al., 2016, pp.10-11).

This study concluded that if a young individual was aware of helpful connections on Facebook (in this case, Friends that went to college), if they are willing to reach out or ask for help in a post, they successfully gathered information that helped them eventually find the right college for them (Jeon et al., 2016). Furthermore, recent reports show that social media platforms are growing as a source of information for general college-search and research (New America, 2015) behind traditional methods such as college websites and in-person visits. Specifically, "prospective students are twice as likely as former students to use social media to investigate colleges (21% versus 10%, respectively)"

(Bonetto, 2015, pp. 2). With the continuously increasing research use of social media by prospective college students and oftentimes their parents (Bonetto, 2015), and due to the fact that researchers have found teenagers do in fact put a certain level of trust into their primary/favorite SNS (Valenzuela et al., 2009), it is important that the CSS maintain an active presence on social media platforms so that potential UM SEAS students may access their profiles throughout the college and/or program search and decision making process.

Finally, it is crucial that SEAS and the CSS be aware of social media best practices along with the activity of their competitors. Since “institutional branding” using social media plays an important role in a university’s online presence (Bélanger, 2014), the CSS must be sure to represent themselves in a way that will appeal to prospective SEAS students. Researchers have concluded that “organizations should allocate human and financial resource to social media to manage the interactive features of social media. This should be done within a comprehensive strategic plan” (Khan et al., 2014, pp.32). Moreover, Top Non Profits (2017) recognizes utilizing the use of scheduling posts ahead of time, posting often (usually three to four times a week), utilizing visuals and engaging graphics in posts, and being responsive and interactive on SNS as “rules of thumb” best practices for nonprofit organizations on social media (Top Non Profits, 2017). Furthermore, like any successful business, the CSS must also be aware of the activity of their competing research centers at other environmental programs that may be recruiting the same students. These programs include, to name a few, the Arizona State University School of Sustainability (School of Sustainability, schoolofsustainability.asu.edu), the Center for Sustainable Engineering and the Center for Climate and Energy Decision

making at Carnegie Mellon University (Environment at CMU, cmu.edu/environment/research), and the Center for Business and the Environment at Yale University (Yale Center for Business and the Environment, cbey.research.yale.edu). Many of these competing centers and schools are currently active on Facebook and Twitter by posting regular and engaging updates with their audiences. This signals to the CSS that an active SNS presence is necessary, particularly on the same platforms as their competition, in order to get noticed by their target users. Furthermore, by utilizing the strengths of social media, colleges, universities, and companies in general have a new level of communication and flexibility combined with the general public alongside traditional business promotions (Mangold & Faulds 2009).

We argue that social media is a hybrid element of the promotion mix because it combines characteristics of traditional IMC tools (companies talking to customers) with a highly magnified form of word-of-mouth (customers talking to one another) whereby marketing managers cannot control the content and frequency of such information (Mangold & Faulds, 2009, pp.359).

Additionally, the University of Michigan Communications website (vpcomm.umich.edu/digital-social) has recognized the power of utilizing social media for a mix of promoting and communicating, and has incorporated instructions for ideal use into their social media strategy (socialmedia.umich.edu). Both sites stress the importance of utilizing social media research and analytics to effectively create messages and an overall online presence that will successfully reach each school's target demographics (The Regents of the University of Michigan, 2017). Currently, the CSS issues a once-per-semester newsletter with a large, and somewhat poorly-organized volume of information

(Center for Sustainable Systems, css.umich.edu). With shorter, more visual, increasingly frequent, and more engaging social media updates, the center may be able to communicate with prospective students more effectively and in a more engaging way.

Future research possibilities for the CSS to delve deeper into social media use and understanding include deciding which social media platforms are best for which types of messages and for what audience, and how to best transition the center's current strategy into a more social and dynamic approach. These topics will be explored as the semester progresses and by other members of "Something Blue" in other research reports. In conclusion, due to the increasing use of SNS in the everyday lives of high-school and college students, and in the successful business practices of colleges and universities, it is essential that any modern school, program, or research center keep multiple social media accounts up-to-date in order to properly appeal to prospective students. Teenagers and prospective college students *are* on social media, and they are now beginning to use their social media platforms to aid in their college and program searches and decision-making. As a result of the findings discussed in this background research report, it is strongly encouraged that the Center for Sustainable Systems at the University of Michigan School for Environment and Sustainability incorporate active social media accounts into their main communication and outreach plan in order for the center to grow in numbers and success.

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