# REVIEW

# Social Media as an Engagement Tool for Schools and Colleges of Pharmacy

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**Objective.** To describe the importance of and potential approaches to social media strategy development for schools and colleges of pharmacy.

**Findings.** In recent years, pharmacy educators have begun exploring the benefits of social media. Effectively utilizing social media as a tool to fulfill marketing, recruitment, and student engagement initiatives is contingent on having a fully developed social media strategy that is well-positioned for success. Developing a sustainable social media strategy involves the following important components: establishing goals and objectives, identifying target audiences, performing competitive and channel analyses, developing content strategy, activities planning, identifying roles, budget and resources planning, and analyzing ongoing performance.

**Summary.** This paper provides relevant information and guidance for colleges and schools of pharmacy that wish to enhance their social media presence.

**Keywords:** social media, strategy, marketing tool, recruitment, engagement

## INTRODUCTION

Social media use has exploded in the past decade – changing the way we communicate, share information, stay up to date with current events, and perceive the rest of the world. In 2016, 69% of all adults in the US reported using at least one social networking site.[1] Social media has been increasingly harnessed for its impact in business, politics, and academia; today, many pharmacy schools can be found on social media as well. Given their pervasive nature, ease of use, and familiarity among adults of every age group in modern society, social networking sites lend themselves well to the marketing efforts of both corporations and higher education institutions.[2-8]

Higher education can be viewed as a competitive market in which institutions are constantly competing for students. Therefore, using social media in a similar way that commercial businesses do to reach and connect with key stakeholders makes sense as a marketing practice.[2] In a 2016 survey conducted by the Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE), almost 90% of the 1,100 respondents, including institutions of all types, agreed that social media is much more important in marketing strategy now compared to three years ago.[3] Universities have dedicated increasing amounts of attention and resources to social media efforts, and in the field of marketing, social media spending has grown over the past

decade and is projected to continue climbing.[4,5] Its value in higher education is substantiated by data showing correlations between social media use and improved measures of student satisfaction, social integration, community building, relationship quality with one's school, and students' sense of loyalty and trust toward an institution.[6-8] Additionally, college applicants are increasingly viewing the social media of their prospective schools and relying on information gathered via these networks to help inform their enrollment decisions.[6] A 2016 report found that half of all surveyed students were using social media for this purpose, and that about 80% took into account conversations with current students carried out through social media when making their final decisions. Despite the need for further studies that can provide empirical, quantitative data to describe the exact impact of social media on marketing and recruitment efforts, student engagement, retention rates, and alumni giving, the existing literature along with anecdotal evidence and data trends strongly suggest that institutional use of social media is a prudent and valuable investment for achieving success in these initiatives.[6-8]

Given the ubiquitous nature of social media today, simply having an online presence is unremarkable in business, and on its own, likely has no bearing on marketing and student-related outcomes in higher education as well.[9] In 2011, 92% of the top 100 colleges and universities ranked by *U.S. News*—all four-year institutions offering a variety of undergraduate, master's, and doctoral degrees—were using social media and averaging 3.7 social

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networking sites per institution.[10] With the growth in number of US pharmacy schools from 21 to 138 between 1900 and 2017, it has become increasingly important for schools to distinguish themselves and develop strong reputations in order to reach student engagement and recruitment-related goals and initiatives.[11,12] Today, gaining a competitive advantage through social media marketing hinges not on having a social media account, but on how effectively that social media account is run.[9] With little information and guidance on effective social media use readily available in the literature, it is likely that many pharmacy schools are uncertain of how to manage their social media to achieve success. Supporting this is research that suggests that graduate admissions offices struggle with implementing and managing their social media in a way that achieves their initiatives.[4] In a 2012 survey conducted by the National Association of Graduate Admissions Professionals (NAGAP), social media was used as part of recruitment efforts for 80% of graduate schools.[13] However, only 5% reported tracking or profiling their followers, and only 30% used monitoring tools to assess the effectiveness of their social media use. Given that graduate recruiting efforts are often decentralized and coordinated by individual programs, suboptimal success with social media may very well be attributed to insufficient resources and lack of a well-developed strategy.[14] This review aims to provide insight into social media strategy development and best practices, and ultimately help inform schools that wish to establish or enhance their social media presence.

## METHODS

Effectively using social media as a tool to fulfill marketing, recruitment, and student engagement initiatives is contingent on having a fully developed strategy that is well-positioned for success. A literature search was conducted, including a review of written materials shared by social media marketing experts. The following were identified as important components of developing a sustainable social media strategy: establishing goals and objectives, identifying target audiences, performing competitor and channel analyses, developing content strategy, activities planning, identifying roles, budget and resources planning, and analyzing ongoing performance.[15,16]

*Establishing Goals and Objectives.* The first step to developing an effective social media strategy is setting overall goals and objectives, which identify a clear focus for social media efforts, define success, and establish parameters for what a strategy is attempting to accomplish as a whole.[15,16] Objectives, or sub-goals, should adhere to the SMART criteria and be specific, measureable, attainable, relevant, and time-based.[15] Examples of overarching

goals in higher education that will reflect reasonable expectations of success for pharmacy schools include bolstering recruitment efforts, engaging with current students, connecting with an institution's alumni body, strengthening an institution's brand and reputation, and establishing social media as an efficient and valuable communication tool.[17,18] An example of a specific objective falling under a goal of supporting recruitment efforts may be increasing enrollment yield rate by 10% in the next recruitment cycle.

*Identifying Target Audiences.* Identifying primary and secondary audiences is important for guiding the generation of content that will be appropriate and engaging for one's followers.[15] By researching and collecting data on one's key stakeholders, an institution becomes better able to resonate and connect with them. Things to consider include determining the needs, interests, demographics, motivation, and preferred social media channels of one's audience.

Social media use in higher education involves additional considerations compared to other sectors because it has a segmented audience composed of diverse key stakeholder groups such as prospective students, current students, and alumni.[19] Pharmacy schools are thus faced with the challenge of determining how to meet the unique needs of each target group, including high school students, college students, graduate students, and alumni. Even within pharmacy education, target audiences can be highly variable. For example, early assurance 0-6 and 2+4 pharmacy programs tend to have applicant pools and student populations more similar to those of traditional undergraduate institutions, while applicants and students for post-baccalaureate and accelerated programs would be similar to those of traditional graduate institutions. When considering alumni engagement, some schools may have a very diverse body of alumni in terms of generational differences and communication preferences, depending on when their programs were first established. Without a thorough research of one's key stakeholders, having a more heterogeneous audience may decrease the effectiveness of social media-driven marketing and engagement efforts.

One way to address a highly segmented audience is by using social media targeting, which allows for directing posts and messages to reach specific stakeholder groups and populations.[20,21] For a fee, paid targeting options across Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn enable users to aim content toward audiences of a certain demographic, location, education level, occupation, political affiliation, particular interest, and more, while simultaneously enhancing the reach of one's posts. For users with a limited budget, organic targeting or free targeting is also an option,

though much less powerful and limited in its ability to connect with key stakeholders.

*Competitive Analysis.* Observing how competitors and other members of the community use their social media is important for informing one's own strategy by gaining insight into what works and what doesn't, particularly in the context of reaching and connecting with an institution's specific target audiences.[15] Analyzing competitors' social media profiles for different engagement measures and types of content helps to cultivate an understanding of what might appeal to one's own key stakeholders.

The first step in performing an effective competitive analysis is identifying the right competitors to focus on; for brands and corporations, these may be leading competitors in the same niche market or industry influencers.[22,23] In the context of higher education and specifically for pharmacy schools, the most relevant competitors to consider may include peer institutions, aspiration institutions, and regional competitors. After identifying one's competition, the next step is to collect data from competitors' social media pages, which consists of measuring key performance indicators – metrics that describe engagement, brand strength, sales and other marketing activities – across all social media channels.[24] When performing competitive analysis, key performance indicators allow for benchmarking, or the quantification and comparison of social media performance against competitors, which makes it important to select the right key performance indicators.[25] Important key performance indicators to collect and analyze for competitive analysis include follower growth, posting time and frequency, and engagement rate.[15,22] Other things that are important to observe are the types of content shared, the posts and channels with the most engagement, and response times.[26] While some of this information can be found and manually retrieved from competitors' social media pages, some key performance indicators may require the use of competitive analysis tools. Several helpful resources – both free and paid – exist, including Sprout's competitor reports, Simply Measured, Rival IQ, and AgoraPulse.[23,27]

*Channel Analysis.* To effectively achieve one's social media goals while still spending time and resources judiciously, it is imperative to have intentionality behind selection of social media channels.[28] Rather than blindly adopting all channels at once, it is much more prudent to perform a channel analysis to determine which platform would be best for an institution, and to focus on the quality of social media efforts rather than on quantity.[29] When conducting a channel analysis, it is important to take into consideration an institution's goals, its target audiences, and findings from the competitive analysis.[15] For example,

if an institution's main goal is to strengthen brand and reputation, a presence on Facebook might be the best way of reaching the largest audience.[15,30] On the other hand, if an institution wants to establish social media as a quick and effective means of communication and sharing news with students, being on Twitter might make the most sense.

Just as a social media channel has to complement an institution's goals, it also has to be appropriate for its target audiences.[15,30] Factors to consider include demographics and frequently used channels. For example, if the target audience consists of predominantly prospective high school students, then Snapchat may be the best way of reaching this younger population. On the other hand, if the target audience consists of predominantly alumni, then LinkedIn may be an effective way of connecting with a population of working professionals. In general, adopting a channel that target audiences spend the majority of their time on, maximizes the reach of shared content and thus, the probability of attaining one's social media goals. For pharmacy schools, while the proportion of students using Facebook ranges from 76% to 100% and suggests that focusing on Facebook might offer the most return on investment, many students today use more than one type of social media channel, making the selection of channels a decision that has become increasingly complex and requiring a thorough understanding of an institution's particular student body.[31,32] To help guide channel selection, Table 1 presents a summary of most popular channels with corresponding demographics and considerations.

Findings from the competitive analysis are critical to consider as well when selecting a social media channel.[30] After analyzing the social media of competitors, institutions should consider which of their channels has the most followers and/or garner the most engagement, as well as what types of content lead to most engagement. For example, if one's competitors are able to establish robust presences on Twitter with high rates of follower engagement, then it would be reasonable to try Twitter as well. Similarly, if an institution decides that most of its shared content will consist of photos, based on what resonates most with their competitors' audience, then it may make the most sense to be on Instagram.

Lastly, budget and resource constraints may limit the number of channels that an institution can reasonably manage and maintain.[30] Budgeting and resource implications in social media strategy development will be discussed later in this review.

*Content Strategy.* Content strategy has the ability to make or break the success of a social media strategy. Without interesting and engaging content, having

Table 1. Considerations for Channel Analysis

| Channel | Most Popular Audience Demographic | Type of Content Best for | Best Practices |
|---|---|---|---|
| Facebook | Under 65 years old; college educated[1] | All types (including live stream videos and long text posts) with the goal of reaching the largest audience[69] | Limit posts to 250 characters so that posts are displayed in their entirety in the newsfeed;[70] Post actionable content in order to increase engagement (questions, contests, etc.);[70] Highlight specific posts by "pinning" to the top of the page;[70] Post between 1 and 4 pm on Thursdays and Fridays or between noon and 1 pm on Saturdays and Sundays to maximize engagement, with weekend posts getting more engagement than weekday posts;[71] Posting on Sunday yields the most engagement, followed by Saturday;[72] Post content that combines questions with images to maximize engagement;[72] Post visual content (photos, videos) to get more engagement than with posts containing strictly text;[72] Post videos to get the most "shares" and post giveaways to get the most comments;[72] Link articles that are 1,000-3,000 words in length to boost engagement;[72] Post shorter text content to maximize engagement;[72] Directly upload a video to Facebook to get over 6 times the engagement of posting a YouTube video;[72] Share photos from Instagram to Facebook to get more engagement than directly posting a photo on Facebook;[72] Avoid using hashtags on most posts; they result in less engagement than posts without them.[72] |
| Twitter | Under 30 years old; college educated; income of $50,000 or higher[1] | Short timely text updates or commentary that contributes to trending topics or news[69] | Post on weekends and Wednesdays for increased engagement;[71] Post between noon and 3 pm, and around 5 pm for increased engagement;[71] Tweet visual content to boost engagement;[73,74] Keep tweets short;[73,74] Use one or two hashtags to get more engagement than using no hashtags or too many hashtags;[73,74] Ask followers to "retweet" a tweet to increase the number of "retweets," making sure to spell out "retweet" instead of "RT;"[73] Tweet multiple times throughout each day;[75] Avoid posting too many tweets that are purely self-promotional; being casual, candid, and conversational with tweets can help build relationships with followers.[74] |

Table 1. (*Continued*)

| Channel | Most Popular Audience Demographic | Type of Content Best for | Best Practices |
|---|---|---|---|
| Instagram | Under 30 years old; college educated;urban areas[1] | Polished and high quality visual content[69] | Posting on Mondays is associated with slightly more engagement;[71] Post videos outside of work hours to maximize engagement;[71, 76] Post one to two times per day and maintain consistency;[75] Include 11 or more relevant hashtags to increase the discoverability of your content;[76] Post more photos than videos because photos get more engagement than videos;[76] Disregard the length of captions, which aren't important for engagement;[77] Use captions to supplement visual content with storytelling;[78] Post photos with faces to boost engagement;[77] Post high-quality images that are visually appealing;[78] Maintain consistent style and theme across content.[78] |
| Snapchat | Under 34 years old; women[6] | Temporary visual content characterized by an authentic, "behind the scenes" feel that is aimed toward a smaller but more active and engaged audience[69] | Create a geofilter for your institution;[79] Orchestrate takeovers by students from various departments or campus organizations to showcase campus culture, student activities or events, and to allow an intimate view into student life;[79] Avoid posting long stories that may lead to followers losing interest; limit posts to a minute and keep them short, fun, and interesting;[80] Tell stories and build anticipation to keep followers engaged;[80] Focus on creating content that is creative, entertaining, and quirky by using Snapchat's filters, drawing tools, and editing capabilities;[80] Focus less on building the brand and its reputation, but on establishing a sense of real connection with followers.[80] |
| LinkedIn | Under 50 years old;college graduate; income of $50,000 or higher;urban or suburban areas[1] | Professional, educational, and informative written content, as well as career opportunities[69] | Post around the middle of the work week before and after work hours between 7 and 8 am and between 5 and 6 pm to maximize engagement;[71] Share posts that ask questions, feature visual content, and include links to get more engagement;[81] Publish about 20 posts per month to reach 60% of your audience;[81] Create "how-to" posts and lists posts with headlines including phrases like "x ways to..." and "x things you..." to get the most engagement;[81] Avoid too much self-promotion; posting about relevant, interesting content such as industry trends, news, and leadership content will better engage and grow your audience.[81] |

a presence on social media is not useful to an institution.[28] Decisions should be made regarding the type, tone, format, and style of content, as well as posting times and frequency.

The type, tone, format, and style of content depend upon what is appropriate given the channels selected through channel analysis, and upon the voice that an institution wishes to use throughout its social media.[28] Should posts be shared in the form of text, polls, photos, videos, or links? Should they be light and funny, or informative and serious? Examples of different types of content shared via social media in higher education include news and announcements, student and faculty spotlights, posts about student life and campus culture, tips and how-to posts, third-party content, questions and polls, contests and giveaways, behind-the-scenes and day-in-the-life content, event coverage, etc.[33,34]

In general, planning and creating social media content should take into account what will be most engaging, relevant, and useful to the target audience. For instance, in order to leverage social media effectively as a recruitment tool, it is crucial to understand the needs of prospective students and what attracts them when viewing the social media of a potential school. Research has shown that college-bound high school students are significantly influenced by authenticity and its perceived presence or lack thereof in a school's social media and recruitment tools.[35] One study found that lack of authenticity provoked skepticism, and that inauthentic content was more likely to be viewed as censored advertising.[35] Additionally, the main determinant of perceived authenticity was disclosure – whether or not personal narratives, experiences, opinions, and feelings were shared. As a result, many higher education institutions have adopted the use of blogging as one way of imbibing content with authenticity. Some universities even employ student ambassadors who run social media accounts that provide prospective students with intimate and firsthand perspectives on the school and student life.[32] In pharmacy education today, student blog posts are utilized as well as YouTube videos.[36-39] Especially for early assurance 0-6 and 2+4 programs, of which prospective students are largely digitally native high school students, incorporating authenticity in such ways would likely be an effective practice based on its demonstrated success when implemented by traditional undergraduate institutions. Similarly, if the target audience consists of predominantly current students, then it is important to understand their unique needs. Aspects of social integration, such as feeling as though one "fits in" with a school's culture and identifying with the community as a whole, are negatively correlated with attrition and increase the probability that

a student will remain at a traditional undergraduate institution.[40,41] Thus, sharing content that promotes a sense of belonging and community among students may be a viable tactic for younger students. A third audience that pharmacy schools may consider targeting is alumni.[42,43] In one study that surveyed alumni from 74 different private and public undergraduate universities, sense of identification and connectedness with one's alma mater were positively correlated with alumni-giving behavior and promotion of their universities.[43]

Factors found to contribute to alumni engagement were university prestige, attendance of university events, and student organization involvement. Another study found that integrating unifying imagery, institution pride, relevance, and nostalgia into content is most effective for promoting alumni identification and also boosts social media engagement.[42] Such findings provide useful guidance for the content strategy of pharmacy schools that wish to target their alumni body. Additionally, more higher education institutions are also integrating social media into various fundraising activities, including thanking donors, sending out invitations and reminders for annual fund solicitations, and integrating social media as part of alumni fundraising campaigns such as Giving Days.[44]

Another critical component of content strategy is determining posting times and frequency.[28] While studies and reports have identified certain days and times of maximal user engagement across various social media platforms (Table 1), it is more important to understand the posting times that will yield maximal engagement for an institution's specific audience. Though these pre-identified days and times may be useful as a guideline or starting point, the most effective way of determining periods when one's followers will be most likely to view and interact with shared content is through trial and error – posting content and then monitoring rates of engagement over time. In terms of posting frequency, the most important consideration is maintaining consistency so that followers remain engaged and are able to reliably expect posts on a regular basis.[45] It is essential to be mindful of the posting frequency that is appropriate given the selected social media channel (Table 1), in order to avoid posting too often or not often enough, both of which can cause followers to become annoyed or lose interest.[28] Depending on how many accounts and channels one has, it may be useful to create a social media calendar for planning and coordinating when certain content will be posted to which platforms.[45,46] In addition to helping with organizing and maintaining a regular posting schedule, setting up a calendar will ensure quality content that is created well in advance. If posting content across multiple

platforms, it may be useful to use tools such as Hootsuite, Tweetdeck, and Buffer that allow for sharing and scheduling posts in advance from a single dashboard.[47]

*Activities Planning.* Facilitating the successful implementation of social media requires a fully developed plan for all activities including usage, training, and management.[16,48] One of the most important components of this step is developing a comprehensive social media policy that outlines all expectations for staff, social media use, and how content should be managed. For both corporations and higher education institutions, these policies are usually readily available online. Generally speaking, a social media policy exists to set parameters for social media use, protect an institution's brand and reputation, prevent against potential legal issues, and create uniformity and consistency across channels. Such a policy should set forth clear guidelines that promote effective and appropriate use of social media by outlining rules of etiquette, terms of misuse, consequences of misuse, confidentiality, legal or security risks, and risk management procedures. However, for most pharmacy schools, it's likely that developing a new social media policy would not be necessary—higher education institutions typically set forth social media policies that apply to all of an institution's official social media accounts and to all personnel responsible for running these accounts.[49-51] University social media policies often refer to other policies as well—such as student handbooks and codes of conduct – and extend these guidelines for etiquette to digital platforms. Particularly when students run institutional social media accounts, help create content, or are otherwise involved in a school's social media efforts through roles such as that of a social media ambassador, these rules and regulations are important for preventing inappropriate conduct and misuse of social media. Other considerations of activities planning include deciding on content approval processes, editorial controls, and responding protocols.[16]

*Identifying Roles.* Adequate and efficient staffing is imperative for the long-term success and feasibility of implementing a social media strategy. Clearly defining and establishing roles for each member of the social media team is critical for ensuring that tasks and responsibilities are appropriately delegated.[16,52] The size of a social media team varies widely among corporations and higher education institutions, and depends on a number of factors including strategy goals, number of channels utilized, content strategy, budget considerations, and both the current and future size of the overall community. Within higher education, some institutions rely completely on students to run social media accounts, some hire a team of full-time employees, and many use joint efforts of both students and hired employees.[53,54] Even among corporations, the majority of teams perform social media tasks in addition to other job responsibilities, rather than being full-time employees dedicated solely to social media.[55] If an institution's budget and resources are limited, it may be advisable to hire one full-time employee completely dedicated to social media, and additionally delegate tasks and responsibilities to students and other staff.[16,52] Generally, this full-time employee serves the role of a social media manager – someone involved in most, if not all, aspects of the strategy and carrying out corresponding tasks.[16,56-59] The responsibilities of a social media manager can include but are not limited to developing and overseeing the strategy, managing and monitoring all social media accounts, planning and publishing content, and performing analysis. If the budget permits, another useful hire would be that of a content creator; given that content is the most central aspect of social media, it is crucial for an institution to have the staffing needed to handle the workload of generating content.[52,56-58] Other potential roles within a social media team include that of a community manager, who is responsible for connecting, engaging, and building relationship with one's audience; an advertiser, who is responsible for the advertising strategy; and an analyst, who is responsible for analyzing metrics, monitoring performance, and making adjustments to the strategy accordingly.[56-59] Another option for institutions with limited budget and resources is to outsource the tasks and responsibilities of these roles to external agencies and consultants. Though less costly, external vendors will be less knowledgeable about an institution and its audience, and may consequently be less effective.[59]

*Budget and Resources Planning.* Determining the needs of a social media strategy ensures that an institution has the budget and resources necessary to cover all activities, which allows the strategy to be sustainable in the long term.[15,28] For pharmacy schools, obtaining the budget and resources needed to support long-term implementation and performance monitoring of social media marketing efforts can present a challenge that affects the feasibility of a strategy. Given that budget and resources available may differ significantly between schools, what is feasible for one institution may not be feasible for others. In general, costs to consider include all paid online resources and tools, premium accounts, paid advertising, staffing requirements, and any contracted services. For advertising, all channels offer paid advertisement options with flexible costs that depend on intended reach and engagement goals. An additional advantage of opting for paid advertising is being able to target specific audiences, with users

having the ability to block advertisements from appearing on certain pages or apps.[60] In terms of staffing considerations, the median salary of a social media manager in the United States was approximately $47,000 USD in 2017, while contracted services range from a couple hundred dollars to a few thousand dollars per month.[56,61]

*Ongoing Performance Analysis.* Utilizing analytics tools is critical for tracking progress towards goal, optimizing performance, and ensuring long-term success. Consistent and ongoing measurement of metrics helps determine what practices are working and what aren't, which in turn informs any revisions that need to be made to the strategy.[15] When monitoring performance, it is important to select the most relevant and useful key performance indicators to measure. One common mistake is placing too much emphasis on vanity metrics and not enough on actionable metrics.[62,63] Vanity metrics are metrics that have little value in measuring progress toward goals or cannot be related to strategy goals and objectives, such as sheer numbers of followers or likes. On the other hand, actionable metrics are key performance indicators that are meaningful in measuring, evaluating, and reporting progress toward goals; are useful in marketing decisions; or help to inform the overall strategy. In other words, unlike vanity metrics, actionable metrics have marketing function and value. Examples of actionable metrics include engagement rates, audience growth, site traffic, post clicks, and share of voice, the last of which measures how much stakeholders are talking about one brand compared to its competitors. In higher education, audience growth and engagement metrics – such as rates of sharing and commenting – may be particularly useful key performance indicators to measure and track, given their potential correlation with recruitment success and student engagement.[29] Focusing on the metrics that relate most to one's goals is most effective for measuring progress and making improvements to a strategy.

Performing a social media audit is one way of systematically measuring and monitoring performance on a regular basis.[64] Using a spreadsheet or a template, the basic data that should be gathered in a social media audit for each channel includes posting frequency, number of followers, traffic, other channel-specific metrics, and the percent change in each metric from the previous week, month, or year. Depending on what one's goals are, other metrics may be measured and tracked as well. From this information, one is able to identify the best and worst performing channels, posts, and types of content. In addition to channel-specific built-in analytics, numerous free and paid tools exist to assist with ongoing performance analysis and monitoring efforts, including Google Analytics, Hootsuite, TweetDeck, Buffer, and many others.[55,27] Institutions using more than one social media channel may benefit from third-party tools that allow for performance monitoring across multiple channels. Social media managers should invest time in learning about the various analytics tools available for each channel as well as requirements for business or premium accounts, in order to take advantage of tools that best complement and suit the needs of an institution's unique social media strategy.[65-67] Though budget considerations may dictate the selection between free and paid versions, it is important to make decisions based on what will be necessary to achieve an institution's goals – sometimes, even the free versions may be sufficient. For example, Hootsuite provides free analytics data for a user with three social media accounts, and also offers multiple paid options depending on the size of a given social media team and the number of additional social media accounts.[68]

## CONCLUSION

For colleges and schools of pharmacy, developing a comprehensive social media strategy and applying best practices (Table 2) for social media use to specific channels can help engage prospective students, current students, and alumni, and thus contribute to the success of marketing, recruitment, and student engagement efforts. This paper provides relevant information and guidance to inform pharmacy colleges and schools that wish to enhance their social media presence. Although the current literature provides compelling evidence to support the use of social media within undergraduate education, the role of social media in graduate and professional school marketing is less clear. In the context of pharmacy education, schools offering accelerated, post-baccalaureate, or direct-entry programs that mimic the traditional graduate school model may need to carefully consider the costs versus benefits of investing time and resources into the development of a social media strategy. Additionally, there is little in the current body of literature to describe the degree to which pharmacy students may be influenced by a school's social media, if at all. Whether implementation of a well-designed social media strategy significantly affects marketing outcomes and other measures of student recruitment, retention rates, and alumni relations at pharmacy schools is largely unknown, and necessitates additional research in order to bridge these knowledge gaps and to determine the return on investment of social media-driven marketing and engagement efforts in pharmacy education.

Table 2. Best Practices for Higher Education Institutions

**In addition to using channel-specific best practices, the following are best practices for higher education institutions that can be used across all social media channels:**

Social media is a two-way street; interacting with followers goes a long way in establishing a robust presence and boosting engagement;[82]

Be patient; it takes time to gain followers and build a reputation;[82,83]

Responding to negative posts and comments in a way that welcomes open communication with followers, takes advantage of the opportunity to have a discussion, and showcases customer service skills is an opportunity to strengthen reputation; avoid deleting negative comments and posts;[84,33]

Be transparent, honest, and authentic;[33,83,84]

Consider how the people you choose to follow and the posts you like or share reflect on your institution;[84]

Be open and upfront about mistakes, and try to correct them as soon as possible;[84]

Focus on quality over quantity;[83]

Avoid excessive self-promotion or spamming;[83]

Be respectful of everyone in the community;[33]

Post content that seems human and has personality and humor;[33]

Listen to followers and their needs in order to provide them with valuable content;[33]

Integrate social media efforts with the rest of the institution's marketing communication strategy.[33]

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