Social Media, Aggregators, Analytics, and the Writing Center

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In an attempt to increase writing center attendance and overall retention, a social media strategy was put into place in the Spring 2019 semester at Edward Waters College, an HBCU in Jacksonville, FL, and continued through the summer. In this case study, the choice of social media platforms is considered, including what platforms the Writing Center's target audience uses. The use of aggregators for scheduling is also assessed, with an eye to efficacy and economy of time and funding. Finally, the use of social media analytics is discussed to determine the best strategy for analyzing interactions with followers and other users.
Keywords: aggregators, analytics, social media, writing center, HBCU
Follow the EWC Writing Center on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter @ewcwriting

Introduction

While writing centers typically assist with only some of the skills communication centers support, the practices outlined here are transferable. Social Media allows much connection with partners across campus with little effort. At Edward Waters College (EWC), the writing center staff is usually limited to a single tutor and the Director. I manage the social media accounts in addition to my Writing Center Director and Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) Director responsibilities. With proper planning and the right software, my social media work only takes the time I plan out in advance. This article addresses the planning that makes social media use possible for any size center.

The Writing Center at Edward Waters College

EWC is the oldest HBCU in the state of Florida, founded in 1886 and situated in Jacksonville. The Writing Center was founded under the auspices of QEP implementation. QEP is a Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) required accreditation plan to improve some aspect of the institution. The EWC QEP's main goal is to improve student writing. The Writing Center assists with that goal by providing tutors who assist students writing essays, presentations, and other assignments at any stage of the process. Since attendance can also improve retention, GPA, and Persistence (Irvin, 2014), I am working doubly hard to increase center visits. To that end, there is an added goal of improving social media engagement (when a post generates activity) and impressions (when a post is seen by someone) to increase writing center attendance. The count of followers as of August 13, 2019 is Instagram 82, Facebook 63, and Twitter 21. The accounts launched in February 2019. While the follower count may not sound impressive, enrollment totals under 1,000 and the follower counts grow regularly. Also, posts are often seen by non-followers, as the impressions data show. In what follows, the incorporation of multiple platforms, decision to use pre-scheduled post aggregators, and reliance on platform-specific analytics is considered for other writing and communication centers limited in size and personnel.

Incorporate Multiple Platforms

Center directors who want to generate activity on social media should use multiple platforms because colleges and universities serve all age groups. In addition to the current "traditional" Generation Z student, we must cater to Millennials, Generation Xers, and Baby Boomers as they continue to make up a larger share of our students each year. Different platforms serve different audiences and posts should be tailored to the platform. However, to increase efficiency of time, my social media strategy is based on the most popular platform: Instagram. Tailoring for social media platforms means following the "rules" of those platforms. For Instagram the accepted practices are: (1) make the picture the focus and ensure it is visually stimulating and interesting to your audience (Arens, 2019); (2) don't post more than twice a day; once is best practice (Erin, 2019).

During summer 2019, I started the #comebacktojax campaign with the caption "3 weeks left. How sweet it is!" (see Figure 1).

Figure 1.

To encourage retention, I posted a new picture from Jacksonville each week, as a countdown to back to school. I tagged some businesses/local organizations and scheduled all of these on a social media aggregator. One final note on platform use is with a larger follower base; some Directors may have many comments or messages. Autoreply and artificial intelligence "bots" can be set up to mitigate this problem and I would suggest large institutions use these.

Pre-Schedule Posts with Aggregators

Social media aggregator software allows users to schedule posts ahead of time and "push" them to multiple platforms at once. The aggregator links to the social media accounts and posts on a user's behalf. I can schedule a post to go to Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram at the same time months in advance. I can also run analytics on engagement, for a fee. Since the Writing Center budget did not include social media when the center was established, I had to be frugal. I started with Buffer at first, which was convenient. However, after a month, the Instagram integration suffered, forcing me to post manually. Integration problems cost valuable time dealing with IT and negate the purpose of the aggregator to save time. After several months of dealing with this problem on Buffer, I moved to Hootsuite. Hootsuite has smooth Instagram integration and allows users to schedule posts at different times on different platforms. It also has a Chrome extension that adds button to sites to allow sharing to social media accounts with a click. The calendar view feature is also helpful to visual planners (see Figure 2).
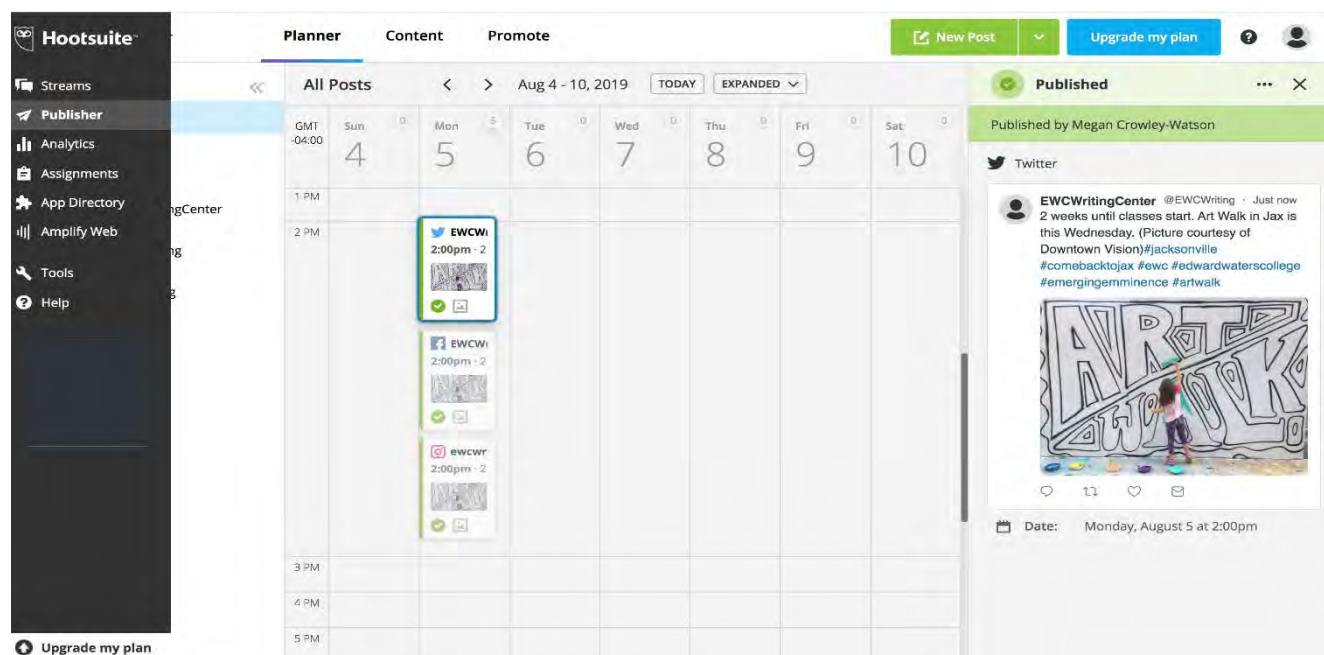
Figure 2.

As far as social media aggregator challenges, I found price the most important consideration. These sites can be expensive, ranging from $120/year to $2,000/year. While many have a free version (e.g., Buffer, Hootsuite, Juicer, and Publr), these versions have drawbacks. None of them provide analytics and Juicer tags all content with its logo. However, if users want analytics, paid software can be worth the cost. They can "boost" posts (increase the number of people who see them), allow users to see and respond to all comments in one place, analyze current trends and hashtags, help users choose the ideal time to schedule posts, track URL clicks, offer chatbots, alert users to increased usage, suggest replies, archive content, and even survey followers and report back results. In short, if users have the budget, paid software is valuable. When I started this project in the middle of the fiscal year, the answer was clear: a free aggregator and Excel for analytics. The good news is, users can easily perform the analytics themselves.

Utilize Built-In Analytics

All three EWC Writing Center social media platforms have what is called "native analytics" since they are built into the apps themselves. Instagram has Insights, Facebook has Pages Manager, and Twitter has Twitter Analytics (see Figure. 3).
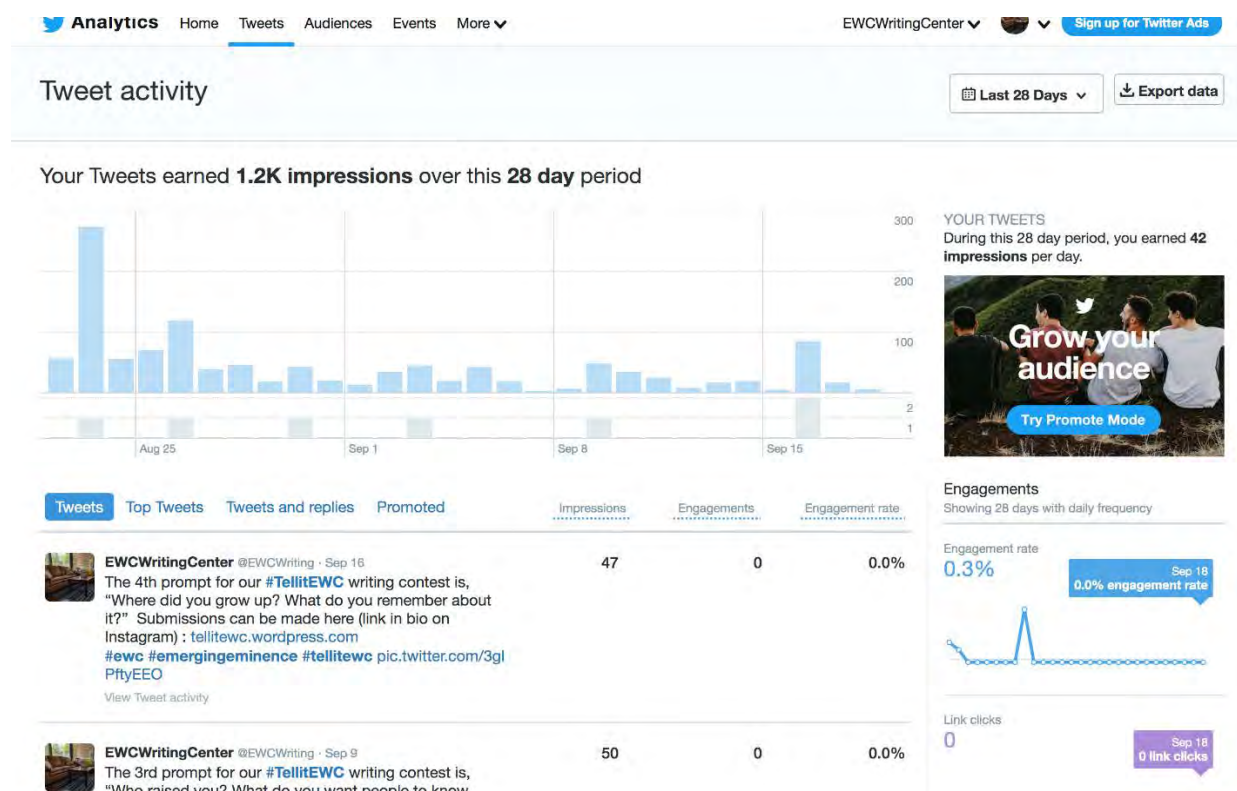
Figure 3.

While these in-app analytics can be useful, they provide disaggregated data and little analysis, which may or may not be helpful depending on a center's goals. Facebook and Twitter both allow users to download all analytics to an Excel spreadsheet. Instagram requires users to use the analytics inside their application, with no download available. As our most popular site, Instagram is also the most difficult to analyze. I built a spreadsheet modeled after the sheets downloaded from Facebook and Twitter, then used Excel to analyze the numbers. First, I looked at the overall number of followers, impressions, and engagements to determine what function each platform performed. Then I drilled down into the Instagram data, looking at the average number of impressions and engagements with a picture and the average number of impressions and engagements

without a picture based on the data from each social media platform.

The most influential factor for engagement and impressions across all platforms was the image that accompanied the post. Posts of logos or clipart had low activity (e.g., Moodle logo posted for a Moodle workshop). Posts with photographs had high activity (e.g., photo of a sunrise on the beach to announce our new website). On Instagram, posts with photographs were twice as likely to have engagements and one and one-half times as likely to have impressions than posts without photographs. Posts involving other departments also saw positive engagement and impressions, likely owing to the combined networks. On Facebook, the QEP workshops got much more engagement than on Instagram. This emphasizes the usefulness of Facebook for event planning. However, just like on Instagram, the posts with photographs were

much more likely to trigger engagements (seven times as likely) and impressions (four times as likely). On Twitter, posts with photographs were three times as likely to have engagements and equally as likely to have impressions. Twitter has many more impressions per post on average, indicating that tweets are the Writing Center's most widely disseminated posts, despite their low engagement.

Conclusion

Based on an analysis of EWC Writing Center's social media engagement and impressions, I will be adding photographs to announcement posts and continuing outreach on campus. Additionally, in fall 2019, I began a social media campaign marketed as a writing contest and labeled with the hashtag #TellitEWC. The Writing Center posts a different personal narrative writing prompt each week. Students will compose their own narratives, but tutors will work with them on subsequent drafts. The best stories, as determined by faculty, will be published at the end of the academic year. This campaign combines the digital and physical spaces in which the Writing Center now exists, promoting digital "attendance" through self-guided writing practice coupled with peer and Center staff feedback. EWC Writing Center's social media use ties directly to the QEP goals of improving student writing and increasing Writing Center attendance. If an institution has a QEP, social media is

valuable as it documents the institution's process and the involvement of various stakeholders in that process. It also provides a means for the process itself. When social media accounts inform and involve, they are a natural vehicle to improve the institution and center attendance.

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Megan Crowley-Watson is the Writing Center Director and QEP Director at Edward Waters College.