Making an impression @UTampaSpeech: A case study using Instagram at The University of Tampa's Center for Public Speaking

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Instagram is one of the most widely used social networking sites for college students (Smith & Anderson, 2018). But using a medium because it is popular does not equate to effective use. During 2018-2019, The University of Tampa's Center for Public Speaking performed an 11-month case study to assess our use of Instagram to examine whether it was the right platform for our communication center. We determined it was, and we offer "best practices" to use in the future and suggest other communication centers consider performing case studies of their own to assess their use of social media.
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Follow The Center for Public Speaking @UTampaSpeech on Instagram!

Organizational Culture: Who We Are, What We Do, and Our Use of Social Media

The University of Tampa is a private, mid-sized liberal arts university located in the Southeastern United States. The Center for Public Speaking was founded in 2010 within the Speech, Theater, and Dance Department. In 2020, our Speech faculty will join the Department of Communication and The Center will transfer its affiliation. The Center operates using its own budget that was acquired in 2019 under the leadership of its new director, who is the first author of this piece. As the spring 2019 semester closed, the university reported an enrollment of approximately 9,000 students. The Center experienced over 2,000 visits in the 2018-2019 academic year, serving roughly 22% of the study body. Like most undergraduate populations, our student body has a range of academic and professional interests, which means the Center must market its services to a varied audience regardless of major.

Social media platforms can be an integral component of communication strategies intended to boost an organization's visibility. But how do we use them effectively within a university setting? Is Instagram the right platform for a communication center and if so, why? During 2018-2019, The University of Tampa's Center for Public Speaking performed a case study to assess Instagram's effectiveness and determine "best practices" for future use. This article highlights key takeaways our research team learned during our 11-month case study using Instagram to enhance our center's visibility.

Facebook and YouTube remain the most widely used social media platforms in the U.S., but Instagram and Snapchat are the most popular among undergraduates, which is our Center's target audience (Smith & Anderson, 2018). To confirm the user-preferences of our target audience, our research team organized a focus group with

undergraduates who varied in majors and year of study. The following quotes are excerpts that represent the perspectives of the group:

> *"I don't want the Center or anything academic flowing into my Snapchat. That account is for my social life and I don't want it saturated. Instagram is different. I follow all different types of accounts"* (Student S).

While our target age audience (age 18-24) uses Instagram at a rate of 71%, which is slightly less than Snapchat, which was reported at a rate of 78%, according to Smith & Anderson (2018), we followed Student S's advice to avoid Snapchat because of our goal to maintain the academic undertone of our Center. Another student described why Instagram was the best medium for us, saying:

> *"I spend most of my screen time on Instagram and am not picky about my feed. It's the easiest way to stay in touch…I knew the Center was closed the week of finals because of your post"* (Student C).

The "easiness" Student C communicates is supported by the significant amount of time she/he spends on the platform. Weaving The Center's profile into an already existing screen-time routine might help expose students to our resources without appearing invasive. Student A voiced concern over The Center's fit in the following quote:

> *"Facebook feels a little too stagnant for The Center. You should keep things visual so we can see what a Speaking Center actually does"* (Student A)

Based on their feedback, we set the goal of curating a social media presence that seemed unobtrusive rather than disruptive. Before this case study, we used Facebook as our primary online platform. The university-sponsored Web page was our secondary source, and Instagram as our third. Students' feedback led us to delete our Facebook account and abandon the idea of a Snapchat. Our primary social media focus from now on is Instagram. In the next section, we offer "best practices" for future use and we hope other communication centers consider using these points and performing case studies of their own.

Best Practices for Using Instagram to Market Your Center

1. Consider the Content.
Our posts share a common theme of "student-centered" and vary in content. Examples of content include: tutors working, classroom activities, Center events (e.g., guest speakers, speech contest), holidays, and "student spotlights." The "student spotlights" humanize tutors (see Figure 1). Showcasing their personalities might help reluctant students become clients. Also, the tutors who are featured tend to share our post to their personal accounts, thus expanding our reach.

Figure 1.

Figure 2.

2. *Consider the Timing.*

When an image involves a specific in-class event, we try to post it immediately after class so it is current. For example, a recent post featured a student eating dessert another student brought for the entire class (see Figure 2). A friend of the student featured texted saying she saw him on our feed. The time between the post and the friend's text was a matter of minutes, which is evidence of this medium's reach and its immediacy. Students enjoy the recognition because it highlights another part of their student identity.

At the beginning of the case study, we planned to post during times when students were typically between classes as well as traditional lunch times. However, the focus group gave us insight that resulted in a change of plans. Student A explains:

> *"Only post two or three times a week because you're academic, not social. And avoid posting during lunch. Post in the morning when we first check our phones and toward the evening before night classes. You need a routine."* (Student A).

The majority of our classes meet twice a week for 110 minutes each session for 4-hour credits. This scheduling means many of our students take evening classes beginning at 6:00 p.m. Based on Student A's feedback, we avoided posting during "in-between class times" and focused on the morning and early evening.

3. *Promote the Channel.*

It is important for our Center to increase our number of followers to help

increase visibility. The Center uses the story feature to reach a larger audience because our posts typically reach 50+ followers and stories receive 100+ views. We aim to generate 2,000 followers by Spring 2020 (based on projected enrollment, that is 21% of the student body). We intend to achieve this goal through student-tutors and professors' word-of-mouth. For example, tutors perform in-class visits to pitch our services and perform speaking demonstrations. Toward the end of the pitch, tutors share our handle and encourage others to follow us. Because of the results of this case study, all Speech faculty are required to include our Instagram handle in their syllabi and it is listed on all promotions materials.

Some popular accounts "follow back" very few accounts as a signal of exclusivity (e.g., 3,000 followers, yet following 10). We do the opposite. It is beneficial to "follow back" those who follow The Center and tag the people and places in our posts to help communicate a message of inclusivity (see Figure 3).

Figure 3.

4. Connect Across Campus.

To increase our presence across campus, we must network with other accounts. Over the 11-month case study, we increased how often we commented on other accounts related to the University of Tampa. For example, The Center comments on accounts related to student organizations, such as the Hammock Club, as well as the hard sciences, keeping in mind Biology is the second most popular major (see Figure 4). We also began commenting on the Dining Services Account because 60% of students live on campus.

Figure 4.

5. Empower Your Student-Employees.

If you have student-employees like we do, consider assigning the responsibility of managing the Instagram account to someone who has a passion for your organization, experience in online marketing, and a desire to grow their

portfolio. The Director appointed Sophia Gullo, a marketing major and speech minor working as a tutor in The Center, as the primary manager of The Center's Instagram during this case study. The successful outcomes of this study led to hiring Aislinn Fallon, a business management major and speech minor, whose primary responsibility is managing Instagram. The Speech faculty and The Center's Director mentor the student-employee while promoting the student-centered nature of our organization.

Challenges

A challenge we are currently experiencing is how to maintain an online presence during summer months. It is difficult to keep an audience engaged in the three months when most are away from campus and disengaged with academics.

Another challenge involves connecting with first-year students who are less inclined to participate in public speaking. "Meeting us" online through Instagram may be the bridge we need to introduce first-year students to speechmaking before they visit us in-person.

Moving Forward

Using social media to promote The Center for Public Speaking has increased our organization's visibility during the 2018-2019 academic year. Though a direct correlation was not proven given the qualitative nature of this case study, the timeframe of our case study and its goal of increasing our Instagram account's effectiveness overlapped with an increase in volume of in-person visits by 156% from the previous academic year. The Center's use of Instagram has evolved from a few professors contributing an occasional photo to a strategic campaign intended to generate

interest and promote our culture. The Center will continue focusing its digital communication efforts on Instagram while avoiding Facebook, Snapchat and other social media sites. Follow us @UTampaSpeech, post, and tag!

References

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