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“So, should we stay in touch?”
A Plan to Build Community
Using Social Media Among
Alumni of the
Michael G. DeGroote
School of Medicine at
McMaster University

Susan M. Emigh

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Abstract

Can a community be maintained or put back together when there is distance? Students of McMaster University’s Michael G. DeGroote School of Medicine spend an intense three years together in its undergraduate program, and then they move on. However, universities, including McMaster, look to maintain rapport with alumni who often support their alma mater: Alumni often appreciate ties to the prestige of a high profile academic institution and to the memories of their time there. The new social media technologies appear to give the chance to maintain or even rebuild that engagement, but universities are stepping into the opportunities slowly. They are cautious because there is no wave of social media acceptance except, perhaps, for Facebook, and the costs of providing true two-way communications on a one-to-one basis is not in the budget. However, building on a survey of its market, this case study looks at using social media to start to build community among alumni of the Michael G. DeGroote School of Medicine.

Keywords: social media, community building, community management, alumni relations, university communication, health communication, school of medicine

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Introduction

Students of McMaster University’s Michael G. DeGroote School of Medicine spend an intense three years together in its undergraduate program. Different from other Canadian medical schools, these students learn in a self-directed, problem-based learning style where they work together in small groups to solve medical issues. The students spend half their time at their campuses either in Hamilton, Kitchener or Niagara and half their time in clinical experiences in hospitals and health care facilities throughout the south-central area of Ontario from Guelph and Brantford to Niagara Falls and beyond (Kelton, 2011).

Traditionally, like most classes, the new physicians lose touch with each other when they graduate and move on to

postgraduate residency programs. Although some stay at the McMaster medical school, all divide up and work with their colleagues in their specialty.

The school's alumni join together again only at reunions to mark significant periods of time, usually decades.

The question is: Can social media platforms build or rebuild ties between the university and the alumni?

Organization Studied

McMaster University's Michael G. DeGroot School of Medicine has 203 first-year medical students. In total, the school has 600 undergraduate medical students along with 800 medical residents in one of 53 specialties or subspecialties (Kelton, 2011).

The medical school has accumulated a total of 4,000 alumni since its first Class of '72. Expansion of the school from 100 to 203 first-year students means 1,500 or 38% of its alumni have graduated in the past decade (K. Kuchmey, personal communication, April 29, 2011).

Currently the Faculty of Health Sciences publishes two issues a year of its alumni magazine *Network*. It has no other specific alumni communications, but it does have a complete website at fhs.mcmaster.ca as well as a Facebook page and Twitter feed, both at machealthsci.

To explore approaches and test assumptions, the social media strategies for alumni at four large English-speaking Canadian medical schools were also examined. The Schulich School of Medicine and Dentistry at the University of Western Ontario has 170 first-year medical students; the Faculty of Medicine at University of Toronto has 250 first-year medical students; the Faculty of Medicine at McGill University has 175 first-years and the Faculty of Medicine at the University of British Columbia has 256, according to the statistics of The Association of Faculties of Medicine of Canada (2011).

Case Study Problematic

Continued engagement of alumni is important to universities, as engaged alumni enhance the credibility and prestige of their school, as well as offer support through volunteering and funding (Barnard and Rensleigh, 2008; Holmes, 2009; Volkwein, 2010). And the alumni who are most likely to be donors are those who are involved and engaged and kept informed about their alma mater (Pearson, 1999, p. 7).

Physician alumni present a significant opportunity for McMaster and its alumni staff as they are high net worth, both in adding prestige and support, says the university's director of alumni (K. McQuigge, personal communication, Aug. 4, 2011).

The question for this project was whether social media technologies offer an opportunity to help build this community so the university can maintain and strengthen its relationships with physician alumni.

The purpose of the project was to form a strategic plan to use social media to build community among alumni of the Michael G. DeGroot School of Medicine.

Review of Literature

Physicians and Social Media

The first step is to assess how many Canadian physicians are online and involved in social media. A search found no specific information available on doctors, however, in 2010 Statistics Canada said practically all (96.5%) of Canadians with a university degree use the Internet and, in 2011, the national agency said 97% of households with incomes of \$87,000 or more have home Internet access.

A recent study by the research firm Ipsos (as cited by Faber, 2011), said 60% of online Canadians are also on social networks. That ranges from 86% of those 18 to 34 to more than 60% of those 35 to 54 and more than 40% of those 55

and older. Among Canadian social media users, more than 85% are on Facebook, 20% on Twitter and 14% on LinkedIn.

A survey in 2011 of the 3,250 e-panel members of the Canadian Medical Association (CMA) found 59% of the doctors are using a mobile device such as a BlackBerry or iPhone, with 46% downloading software applications to make their job easier through quick access to medical information. Facebook is used at least weekly by 51% of these physicians who, as members of an e-panel, are by definition already online.

Far fewer -- less than 20% of the members of the e-panel -- are using each of the social media of Twitter, LinkedIn, other social networking sites or a medical practice website, and the doctors have professional reservations to doing so. In fact, the CMA study found 80% agreed that use of social media “poses professional and legal risks to physicians” (para. 7). The doctors don’t want to ‘friend’ their patients, as they don’t want to risk either their professionalism or their time. Few of the doctors have used any social media with a medical theme, including Facebook, video or social networking site specifically for physicians. In December, 2011, the CMA issued guidelines for physicians, suggesting rules of social media engagement for physicians. Those included that the doctors understand the technology and audiences, the need to be transparent and respectful of patient confidentiality and, as well, that they keep a focus on their areas of expertise.

McMaster’s medical graduates follow a similar pattern. Analysis of the responses from 112 McMaster medical school graduates to an online study of alumni of McMaster’s Faculty of Health Sciences (Emigh, 2011) in May 2011 found 45% use Facebook. However, the same study found few of the physician alumni use other social media options. Asked about use of other specific social media, never was the answer of 30% for YouTube; 60% for blogs; 82% for LinkedIn; 90% for Twitter and 72% for “other social media”.

Universities and Social Media

Engaging in social media is now “an imperative” for universities (Staton, 2009) and a 2010-2011 study found 100% of 456 American colleges and universities surveyed (Ganim Barnes & Lescault, 2011) are using some social media tools. This ranges from 98% having a Facebook page and 86% using YouTube to 84% having a school Twitter account; 66% a blog; 47% LinkedIn and 41% podcasting.

This adoption is driven, say Ganim Barnes and Lescault (2011), by the recognition of the increasingly important role of social media in today’s world. But most colleges and universities are walking slowly into the water rather than “making a swan dive” (Fernandez, 2010; see also UB Customer Publishing Group, 2010).

The first step in establishing social media strategies for universities is to decide on the audience or audiences and, besides use for student recruitment, universities have sought to develop their alumni relationships.

Two studies on the issue have been done for the Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE), an international association for fundraising and public relations staff of higher education institutions based in the U.S.

Slover-Linett and Stoner (2010a) found the three top goals for university advancement offices’ use of social media are to engage alumni (86%), strengthen the institutional brand (72%) and increase awareness (58%). This backed up Thompson and Casteuble (2008), who found the prime goal of building social media communities is to connect with alumni, find disconnected alumni and get alumni more involved with the institution.

Others have found social media is providing collaborations and connections between alumni and students; helping alumni keep in touch with each other and find jobs, and fundraising (Esposito, 2011; Lavrusik, 2009). They have also found alumni use of social media decreases with age (Pearson, 2010).

As an example, for Nicholas Wormley, the director of alumni and parent relations at Quinnipiac University, it is about providing a rich user experience, as alumni, parents and friends of the university want effective, easy ways to find people, to share, to invite others to share and to collaborate on content (UB Custom Publishing Group, 2010, June). A campus-wide committee was formed at the New England university in 2009 after successful evolution of several social media platforms within his department. “We all have different audiences, but we all need to be sending out the same messages...about academic excellence and national prominence (para. 8).”

Many agree that the tools of social media need to serve a strategy, “[and] ‘because we can’ is not a social media strategy” (Fernandez, 2010). Rather, she says, it’s about finding how to use the different social media tools to benefit everyone and encourage participation (para. 10).

And universities are advised to do audience research, then get buy-in from top management and roll out a little at a time (Fernandez, 2010; UB Custom Publishing Group, 2010).

Suggested best practices have included keeping the information updated frequently; making the site branded and attractive, have goals and metrics and deciding on the institution’s role “to cultivate and steer rather than control” (Thompson & Casteuble, 2008). They suggest inviting students to join so they will continue as alumni but warn that, to date, universities’ social communities seem to be a channel for repurposing content rather than as a lab for distinct content generation.

Different social media have different advantages: Twitter is found to be great for sending out news blasts to large audiences (Fernandez, 2010) while Facebook and LinkedIn, for professional networking, are conversational.

Specifically around reunions, Facebook has been used to recruit reunion volunteers, act as a “soft sounding board” for organizing reunion activities and allowed classmates to catch

up (Bennett, 2010). She adds: “Facebook has enhanced reunions because it’s like an appetizer” (para. 25).

At the time of their survey, Thompson and Casteuble said, measurement of universities’ social communities had often been based on activity levels rather than impact or goal attainment.

But measurement of universities’ social media endeavors is still being talked about more than done (Joly, 2011). “Institutions should rely on analytics to stop making marketing decisions on opinions, guesses and hunches and start embracing a more data-driven approach” (para 1). Joly gives examples of three American colleges where social media activities have been measured against business goals, when used to engage alumni through their enthusiasm for campus sports to promote fundraising. Fernandez (2010) agrees: “Solid research and thoughtful messaging are still the keys to a successful communications strategy, even in...social media” (para. 6).

Universities are also reporting that the actual cost of social media, often flouted as free because of the low entry cost of infrastructure, is in the staff time (Fernandez, 2010; Isurus Market Research and Consulting, 2010; Slover-Linett & Stoner, 2010a), but just adding it to the workload of current staff is “not a productive strategy” (Fernandez, 2010, para. 48). Most universities have had their original social media strategies grow “like Topsy” from the interests and abilities of interested staff or volunteers, but now the institutions are looking at the investments required for realistic and professional social media plans (Fernandez, 2010; Slover-Linett & Stoner, 2010b).

McMaster Physician Alumni and Social Media

A recent online survey found alumni of McMaster’s Michael G. DeGroot School of Medicine are interested in more information from their alma mater (Emigh, 2011). The larger study of alumni of the Faculty of Health Sciences had responses from 113 medicine alumni, for a confidence interval

of plus or minus 10%, 19 times of 20, thus offering directional rather than precise information.

The majority read mail, email and alumni magazines sent to them by the university and the Faculty of Health Sciences. Asked if additional information was available for the Faculty's alumni, 54% of the medical graduates said they'd be likely to read a regularly distributed email newsletter, 44% said they'd go to a website, and 13% said they'd access "Facebook, Twitter or other social media". Regarding the e-mail newsletter, 76% of all respondents said they'd want it four times a year or more frequently.

The top interests for further information by a majority of medical alumni was information on issues facing health care and research (73%); issues facing higher education (62%); Faculty research (59%), classmates' updates (59%), Faculty programs and curriculum (57%), alumni activities and events (55%), continuing health education opportunities (53%) and FHS facilities and growth (50%).

They are less interested in faculty retirements/obituaries (36%), student community service, issues and opinions (30%), faculty career promotions (25%) and stories about donors (23%). Currently, 28% of the medical alumni keep up with their former classmates, while 51% do not and 20% are ambivalent.

Community Building with Social Media

Social media technologies answer the need for techniques to implement the two-way symmetrical public relations model developed in the *Excellence* study 20 years ago by public relations academic James Grunig. He himself said in 2009: "If the social media are used to their full potential, I believe they will inexorably make public relations practice more global, strategic, two-way and interactive, symmetrical or dialogical and socially responsible" (p. 1).

Sheldrake (2011), agrees, adding that the Internet has added a complex and unprecedented emergent behaviour. He

suggests an influence strategy with specific objectives that reflect the organizations' objectives and strategies, and he outlines the scorecard required to measure it, first selecting the appropriate metrics which sets the validity.

Anderson (2010) references game theory, which is used to analyze mutually dependent conflicts, for application in the emergence of mutual collaboration between marketers and their customers caused by the customer's empowerment by the Internet and the social media era. It is the coordination game, in which both sides gain through cooperation, that is relevant to this study of a university and a group of its alumni.

But building the opportunity for building influence has to be done with the point-of-view of building and maintaining relationships: Straightforward marketing is not welcome in social media, as said by Isbell (2009) in an comment to Lavruski's blog:

Don't forget that this is about people developing relationships with other people, giving away something that is of value without expectation of something in return, and giving them a voice to share in the work that you are doing. You can hope for mutual reciprocity, but it should never be forced upon your "followers" ...when you are sincere about building relationships, providing value, and letting your "friends" be a part of your vision, then the "buy-in" that you get can far surpass many of your other development efforts. ... do not attempt to use social media as a way to push old-school marketing messages upon consumers to get them to buy/donate! (para. 43).

Research Questions

RQ1: What are the current social media strategies at McMaster University and the four largest English-speaking medical schools in Canada that may be used to maintain and grow engagement with McMaster University physician alumni?

RQ2: How may theories on social media community building be used to develop best practice strategies for growing and maintaining the engagement of classes of alumni?

This project looked to answer the recent graduate's question, "So, should we stay in touch?"

Methodology

This case study includes several segments undertaken by its researcher.

The project began with an audit of current social media strategy and outreach to alumni at McMaster University through a review of documentation such as policies; observation of the current social media products and interviews with the university's alumni director, Karen McQuigge, and her public relations coordinator looking after alumni social media, Kyle Kuchmey, and the university's public relations director, Gord Arbeau.

A relevant literature review found rapid changes in the strategy for social media at universities.

This review was followed by an audit of the social media strategy for the alumni of the medical schools at the Schulich School of Medicine & Dentistry at the University of Western Ontario; the Faculty of Medicine of the University of Toronto; the Faculty of Medicine of McGill University and the Faculty of Medicine of University of British Columbia. This included a review of documentation such as policies and observation of social media products. Interviews were then held with:

- Julie Lafford, manager, alumni relations of the Faculty of Medicine, University of Toronto
- Diana Colby, manager of communications, Faculty of Medicine, McGill University
- Patricia Grey, communications coordinator, Faculty of Medicine, University of British Columbia.

Results and Analysis

All universities have had websites for 10 to 15 years and, for most of that time, the universities surveyed have had a password protected area where alumni could give updates to the university's contact information; take up insurance or travel offers; make donations.

Staff at the faculties of medicine report social media opportunities have been developed during the past five years with Facebook, followed by Twitter and YouTube. Table 1 shows an audit of all social media outlets for the faculties of medicine surveyed.

Table 1
Use of social media by large English-speaking Faculties of Medicine/Health Sciences in Canada

University	www	FB	E-news letter	Twtr	You Tube	Linked -In	Blog	Flickr
McMaster	✓ FHS	✓	No	✓	✓	No	No	No
Western	✓ SSM D	✓	No	✓	✓	No	No	✓
Toronto	✓ FM	✓	✓ Internal	✓	No	No	No	No
McGill	✓ FM	✓	✓ Internal ✓ External	No	No	No	No	No
UBC	✓ FM	No	No	✓	✓	No	✓ UBC Med	No

Note. Audit as of September 30, 2011

Facebook and Twitter are the two social media platforms that most of the institutions have invested in. The use of Facebook by both the university and its Faculty of Medicine is illustrated in an audit shown in Table 2. UBC was alone in having a blog (written by staff). Western was alone in having Flickr database (at the time of writing, it contained 584 items).

Table 2
Facebook use by large English-speaking Faculties of medicine in Canada

University	Facebook for University's Alumni Department	Facebook for Faculty/School of Medicine
McMaster University	<p>McMaster Alumni Association</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 599 like • Content: Info, tweets, photos, questions, videos • No friend activity, discussions • Number of postings: 16 • Response: 5 likes/ 2 comments 	<p>McMaster Faculty of Health Sciences</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 518 like • Content: Info, media releases, photos, events, video • No friend activity, discussions • Number of postings: 15 • Response: 3 likes/ 1 comment
University of Western Ontario	<p>University of Western Ontario (None for Alumni Department)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 16,067 like • Content: events, tweets, photos, videos, notes, YouTube • No friend activity • Number of postings: 52 • Response: 120 likes/ 8 comments 	<p>Schulich School of Medicine & Dentistry</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 670 like • Content: Info, media releases, photos, videos • No friend activity, events, • Number of postings: 1 • Response: 1 like/ 0 comments
University of Toronto	<p>University of Toronto Alumni Association</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1,910 members • Content: Info, tweets, events, photos • No events • Number of postings: 7 • Response: 4 likes/ 0 comments 	<p>Faculty of Medicine Alumni</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 283 like • Content: Media releases, media coverage links, pictures • No friend activity, events • Number of postings: 8 • Response: 2 likes/ 0 comments

McGill University	McGill University Alumni <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 7 general alumni groups and 70 special interest groups• 4,551 like (general site)• Content: Info, tweets, media release/stories, photos,• No friend activity, Youtube• Number of postings: 16• Response: 57 likes/ 4 comments	McGill University Faculty of Medicine <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 234 like• Content: Media releases, video, photos, discussions• No friend activity• Number of postings: 3• Response 6 likes/ 0 comments
University of British Columbia	University of British Columbia Alumni Association <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 6,393 like• Content: Info, discussions, events, photos• No friend activity• Number of postings: 5• Response: 8 likes/ 2 comments	UBC Faculty of Medicine <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 60 likes• Content: Info (otherwise, not used)

Note. Audit as of September 30, 2011. Number of postings is count of Sept. 23 to 30, 2011. Response = measurement of 'likes' and comments to Facebook postings Sept. 23 to 30, 2011.

At McMaster University, in its alumni and public relations offices, there is enthusiasm for engaging alumni with social media. But, with few resources to devote to it to date, investments have been judicious. Karen McQuigge, director of alumni, said the university's social media development has been based on what becomes popular, and what "makes sense to us", pointing out that the online avatar world of Second Life did not. However, although McMaster is known for being innovative, there is no pressure to develop social media for alumni: "We're not MIT. We can do as much or as little as we want, but once we have it up, we have to stay committed to it," she said.

Kyle Kushmey, public relations coordinator for alumni, said social media offer a greater impact for more engagement particularly from international alumni.

Openness is one of the strengths of social media and also its challenge, said Gord Arbeau, director of public and community relations for the university. He is enthusiastic, howev-

er, as social media like Twitter and Facebook allow for instant updating to the university's community: "It's a challenge to have the communications 24/7, it can be frightening. But it's also an opportunity to be more confident that we have the infrastructure to talk to our communities."

Alumni and public relations staff at the universities surveyed admit that to date there has not been a lot of audience research before the launch of social media. They have measured response with online analytics that count the number of visits and comments.

"People don't know how to measure success with social media," said McQuigge, adding that her department has learned from what has received attention.

"We've learned that it [social media] takes up more time, and we've had to rethink how we handle it, but I've seen how powerful and helpful it can be," said Arbeau.

There are different approaches. At McGill University, there has been a focus on keeping social media centralized to the university's alumni office, said Diana Colby, communications manager for the Faculty of Medicine. Thus, although the Faculty has a Facebook page, it does not have Twitter, YouTube, Linked-In or Flickr channels. It does, however, have a weekly internal e-newsletter for faculty, staff and students and a monthly e-newsletter sent to alumni and others.

Although agreeing there may be some value in setting up social media at the class level of alumni, Colby said for the most part her Faculty has stayed away from committing to social media.

"With Facebook, you have to be there, but to go further in social media we need the people and resources to go all the way with it. Twitter is so people can feel they're in the know, so it has potential, but it also just creates monsters to feed." She has struggled with a blog by academics, "because our people aren't used to talking to the public" but are more used to academic writing.

The monthly e-newsletter *Focus* for alumni and others was established last year as part of a cutback in the number of

alumni magazines published, but holds promise, she said. "Content is king at the end of the day."

Centralization of social media to the university's alumni office is similar at the University of British Columbia, said Patricia Gray, communications coordinator for the Faculty of Medicine.

At the University of Toronto, the Faculty of Medicine has Facebook and Twitter accounts, but the weekly e-newsletter is for internal communications. Julie Lafford, manager of alumni relations says the university has felt one reason why the use of its Facebook is so low is because the service is blocked at Toronto clinical settings such as the hospitals where many alumni work. Hospitals have restricted online access because of the requirements for patient confidentiality.

The enthusiasm of leadership also impacts the resources and emphasis put on developing social media: At McGill the social media strategy is on hold while a new dean is hired and sets the communications direction; at Toronto's Faculty of Medicine the hesitation of the dean is given as a reason why more social media is not developed.

But the use of social media and websites are constantly changing. At McMaster, alumni websites and services are being set up on a new content management system for the website which will tie all information received directly to the advancement services database. The Schulich School of Medicine & Dentistry updated its website Sept. 30, 2011. At the University of Toronto's Faculty of Medicine, the alumni section of the website, and its related Facebook and Twitter feeds are being revamped and a person is being hired to look after the social media. At the University of British Columbia's Faculty of Medicine, there has been a renewal of social media tied to the launch of its new fundraising campaign.

The universities report that they are excited about the opportunities for alumni engagement with social media.

"We've only been involved for three years, we're just starting to harness the energy," said Lafford at the University of Toronto.

Arbeau at McMaster agreed: “We’ve just scratched the surface of what we can do.”

Conclusions & Future Directions

Some Canadian universities got into social media, for the most part, with a throw-it-at-the-wall-and-count-what-sticks approach in its early days just three or four years ago.

An understanding has developed, at least in the big picture, of the need for a much more thoughtful strategy building approach. It is recognized that the strategy requires a better understanding of the audience interests; specific communications goals for establishing social media conversations; a knowledge of the advantages of the different types of social media and the importance of measurement of results. But resources, or the lack of them, are also a consistent issue, and none of the universities are being extravagant in budgeting for their adoption of social media.

But theory around building communities using social media doesn’t seem to have a lot of impact, as universities have viewed the development of these new communications modes from a pragmatic point of view.

Both the literature review and interviews made it clear that universities agree on the potential of social media links to keep their alumni close, but investments in developing those opportunities have been small as resources have not been abundant.

So, to answer the first research question about what current social media strategies at McMaster and other Canadian medical schools may be used to maintain and grow engagement with McMaster physician graduates, the answer may be only to step carefully, knowing any initiative must be maintained.

To answer the second research question about how theories on social media community building may be used to develop best practice strategies for growing and maintaining engagement of classes of alumni, the answer appears to be

that there may well be opportunity if there is a commitment to invest the resources of staffing and time to build a community one person at a time. The issue today is finding the creativity, resources and commitment to do so.

For McMaster's Michael G. DeGroot School of Medicine, a scan of the use of social media by universities; the market information about the use of social media by doctors and McMaster's survey of medical alumni point to the fact that the best opportunities may be in a regularly-produced e-newsletter, updates on Facebook, and Twitter to keep people informed, and updates on YouTube to entertain.

Limitations to this study must be outlined here. This is a rapidly changing field, and studies only a few years old are often irrelevant to the current social media scene.

As well, the researcher for this study may have had an unconscious prejudice because of her role as the director of public relations responsible for alumni communications for the Michael G. DeGroot School of Medicine and development of social media for the school and the Faculty of Health Sciences. She is also the researcher for the 2011 Faculty alumni study referenced. However, any bias is inadvertent.

That said, the next steps will be continued development of the social media strategic plan outlined here. The communications staff is examining the option of establishing a regular e-newsletter to supplement the print alumni publication. The addition of an alumni officer who is concentrating on the medical school's graduates has brought both interest and resources to develop a social media program. It is expected to start small, but grow with response and opportunity.

So, the answer to the question, 'should we stay in touch', is, most emphatically, yes.

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