

How to set benchmarks in social media: Exploratory research for social media, lessons learned

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Ever since social media emerged as a significant part of the communications and marketing mix, organizations have been trying to assess their position and reputation within blogs, social networks and other channels of social media. Much has been proposed as far as metrics and standards for measurement, but for the vast majority of organizations, until recently, the answer has been “it depends.”

As organizations have tried to figure out how to proceed in social media, increasingly they’ve conducted primary research to find out what others in their market place were doing, what were the norms and what were the best practices. During the past year KDPaine & Partners has conducted several benchmark reputation studies for a wide variety of organizations and in the course of conducting these benchmarks we have established a standard methodology and schema that can be used by any organization to assess and measure its position in social media.

This paper addresses the research methodology, and provides detailed descriptions of the collection and analysis procedures as well as the coding instructions for these benchmark reports. We will further discuss how the organizations are using these benchmarks to create and improve their own communications programs.

Discussion of overall research goals

Social media is a new and unfamiliar development for many companies and institutions. It is growing so quickly and taking on so many new forms that many organizations are at a loss to understand its present use and future possibilities.

Georgia Institute of Technology found itself in just that position. It wanted to organize and improve its institutional use of social media, but needed help to understand the myriad options, and to develop effective new programs with realistic goals.

Georgia Tech is home to some 22,000 scholars, faculty and administration. It is consistently ranked in U.S. News & World Report's top ten public universities in the United States. Georgia Tech is in competition with other top-ranked universities for students, faculty and research grants, so it was important for it to understand not just its own social media usage, but also how it compared with that of competing academic institutions.

To better understand its social media presence and options, Georgia Tech asked KDPaine & Partners to undertake a major study of social media use at academic institutions. Presented in this paper are the major results of that study, as well as benchmarks that institutions of higher education can use to compare with their own social media results.

Research Goals

Earlier research had shown that social media is an important tool for academic admissions departments, and in many cases is more commonly used in academia than in the

corporate world (Barnes & Mattson, "The Game Has Changed: College Admissions Outpace Corporations in Embracing Social Media"). In this case, 88% of responding admissions departments said that social media was Very Important or Somewhat Important to their marketing/recruitment strategy and 61% said that they used social media. In particular, 33% used blogs, 29% used social networking, and 19% used video.

So Georgia Tech had no doubt that social media was important. The question was how important, and which media were more important than others?

With the above concerns in mind, KDPaine & Partners designed a research program for Georgia Tech. The following major goals were decided upon:

1. Determine specifically what presence and activity Georgia Tech and peer institutions had in social media.
2. Advise Georgia Tech on what it should be doing in social media: What changes should it make to its present programs, and/or what new programs should it add?
3. Set benchmarks for Georgia Tech to judge its results by after it implements its new social media program(s).

Research Methodology

Standardization of collection techniques

To best achieve these goals, it was decided to observe and explore a range of social media channels for Georgia Tech as well as a small group of peer academic institutions. Typical patterns of traffic and usage could then be determined.

Four peer institutions were chosen by Georgia Tech as its closest national competition for students, faculty, and research resources.

The following social media channels were observed:

- * 50 external blogs in 7 categories - -chosen from their applicability to Georgia Tech's goals
- * 114 institutional blogs – essentially all blogs produced by peer institutions
- * 1668 YouTube videos – all that were posted during the time period
- * 811 items on Facebook that were posted during the time period. (Broken down, this was 405 network discussion posts, 53 freshman group discussion posts, and a sample of 353 popular topics. Note: KDPaine & Partners did not look at any student profiles or retain names of any individual students. All items examined were available to any user with a Facebook account.)
- * Social bookmarking sites, including Digg, Fark, Newsvine, Reddit, Slashdot and del.icio.us, based on assumptions of popularity.

Data was gathered for a 30-day period between September and November of 2007, and included all references to Georgia Tech and the four peer institutions. To ensure comparability and a manageable data set, content related to athletics was not included. To allow context comparisons, back content for discussion volume was collected for Facebook groups from January - November 2007.

Standardization of terminology – types of conversations, types of content

During the course of the study, KDPaine & Partners established a standard set of definitions to describe the conversations and media types that people use in social media. The 27 standard types of conversations are:

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| <i>1. Acknowledging receipt of information</i> | <i>15. Giving a shout-out</i> |
| <i>2. Advertising something</i> | <i>16. Making a joke</i> |
| <i>3. Answering a question</i> | <i>17. Making a suggestion</i> |
| <i>4. Asking a question</i> | <i>18. Making an observation</i> |
| <i>5. Augmenting a previous post</i> | <i>19. Offering a greeting</i> |
| <i>6. Calling for action</i> | <i>20. Offering an opinion</i> |
| <i>7. Disclosing personal information</i> | <i>21. Putting out a wanted ad</i> |
| <i>8. Distributing media</i> | <i>22. Rallying support</i> |
| <i>9. Expressing agreement</i> | <i>23. Recruiting people</i> |
| <i>10. Expressing criticism</i> | <i>24. Showing dismay</i> |
| <i>11. Expressing support</i> | <i>25. Soliciting comments</i> |
| <i>12. Expressing surprise</i> | <i>26. Soliciting help</i> |
| <i>13. Giving a heads up</i> | <i>27. Starting a poll</i> |
| <i>14. Responding to criticism</i> | |

Additionally we identified 19 Types of YouTube Video content:

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| <i>1. Advertisement</i> | <i>11. Montage</i> |
| <i>2. Animation</i> | <i>12. Music Video</i> |
| <i>3. Demonstration</i> | <i>13. News Broadcast</i> |
| <i>4. Event/Performance</i> | <i>14. Promotional Video</i> |
| <i>5. Fiction</i> | <i>15. Sightseeing/Tour</i> |
| <i>6. Film</i> | <i>16. Slide show</i> |
| <i>7. Home Video</i> | <i>17. Speech</i> |
| <i>8. Instructional Video</i> | <i>18. Television Show</i> |
| <i>9. Interview</i> | <i>19. Video Log</i> |
| <i>10. Lecture</i> | |

Standardization of qualitative data such as tone, positioning and visibility

Tone was defined as follows:

POSITIVE	You are more likely to think the school is a good place to learn, do research, send a child for education, work or donate money.
NEUTRAL	The article doesn't give you enough information to feel either way, or it gives information that is both positive and negative, and you feel you'd need more information before you could make a decision.
NEGATIVE	You are less likely to think the school is a good place to learn, do research, send a child for education, work or donate money.

We also characterized each item (post, comment, Facebook thread, video) as either high visibility or low visibility depending upon where in the item the brand was mentioned.

We also examined whether each item contained one or more of the institutions key messages, what subjects were discussed, which departments or colleges were mentioned and how each item positioned the institution on key issues.

Definitions of benchmarks – picking peer institutions and competitors

A total of 4 peer institutions were selected with which we could compare and contrast results. Peer institutions were selected based on their proximity in national rankings, and the degree to which the institution was seen as a rival for students, faculty and grants.

Research Results

Goal #1:

Determine the social media presence and activity of Georgia Tech and the peer institutions.

Summary chart of net results for all media across all institutions

	External Blogs	Facebook Discussion	Institution Blogs		Social Bookmarks		YouTube
	Avg. Comments	Thread Length	Avg. Comments	Avg. InLinks	Avg. Bookmarks	Avg. Comments	Avg. Comments
Georgia Tech	18	3	2	8,246	659	105	2
Peer #1	11	3	0	590	140	22	7
Peer #2	6	2	1	762	305	40	8
Peer #3	13	5	5	1,405	206	70	4
Peer #4	15	2	1	661	169	36	4
OVERALL	13	3	2	1,687	228	59	5

Blog Findings

Over all the external blogs (those not hosted by an institution) studied, the median number of comments per blog post was roughly 3 (depending on category), and this amount of activity is a good benchmark of reasonable traffic. But the average number of posts per comment was 13, a level that generally indicates strong engagement. And, if the topic was controversial, a post got as many as 35 comments. After 3 days most comments were made, and after 14 days there would almost definitely be no additional comments.

And for institutional blogs (hosted on the domains of an institution, like gatech.edu, for instance), we found that roughly 2 out of 5 postings included at least one key message of the institution. Note that this level of message communication is about what one would expect for articles in traditional media. This is a counterintuitive result; the institutions are writing their own blog articles, so we would expect a somewhat higher level of message communication for the blogs than for traditional media. (GT has suggested that this result is likely due to its desire to generate content that is less calculated, less "marketey," and more authentic.) Thus a good benchmark for message inclusion in articles in internal blogs is at least 2 out of 5.

Social Bookmarking Findings

As for social bookmarking, we found a rough median of one submitted item every other day, with a lot of variance between schools.

Facebook Findings

- * Less than one percent of users used network-level discussion features.
- * By September, discussion hosted by freshman groups decreased 99%.
- * Almost 1/3 of content posted to profiles was related to a home institution.
- * 22% of Facebook discussion was related to the asking and answering of questions, second only to advertising (30%).
- * 56% of questions went unanswered, but most unanswered questions were not related to the institution.
- * High school students accounted for 8% of all questions. Almost all of their queries were answered.

Special Research Question #1:

What subject matter consumes the bulk of the discussions across all social media?

The data shows that the answer to this question will never be simple. Academic discussion is much more fragmented and diffused than corporate or nonprofit discussion. University society and interests are far more diverse, and so the answer is usually, "These three or four things," or, "These three or four other things." It is rarely just any one subject that audiences discuss.

In general, dominant topics of discussion for each medium are:

- * YouTube- Students, Campus Life
- * External Blogs- Research, Institution News
- * Institution Blogs- Campus Life (when institution related), Science/Education (overall)

- * Social Bookmarking Sites- Research, Institution News
- * Facebook- Campus Life

Special Research Question #2:

What is the influence of traditional media?

Part of the purpose of the study was to determine the extent to which traditional media triggers social media content. We found that:

- * Although traditional media has some influence over social, it is not a full predictor of content or visibility in social media.
- * On average, bloggers included as many as six links to external content in a post. The third most common link source was traditional news media sites.
- * Of all of the links to pages on Peer#1.edu that were found in our population of external blog posts, 26% of them were links to content found in the newsroom.
- * On Facebook, traditional news media sites were the source of 25% of popular items posted to profiles.
- * One third of content on social news sites was from traditional media sources.
- * Twice as many hard news stories were posted to social news sites as features.

Goal #2:

Advise Georgia Tech on what it should be doing

Our recommendations to Georgia Tech based on Overall Analysis:

1. Add tactics targeting social bookmarking sites to traditional media program plans. Learn what gets bookmarked for sites relevant to your institution and the most common sources of seeded items, and put those on your priority media lists in the hopes that you can get listed on social bookmarking sites.
2. Because the individual voice was found to be more engaging and effective, GT should encourage individuals (especially faculty), rather than departments, to maintain institution blogs.
3. Engage directly with popular external bloggers.
4. Limit engagement with Facebook to contact with group officers.
5. Focus on creating YouTube playlists of thematic content already found on the site.

Note that recommendations #1, #2, and #4 are definitely counter to current practice, based on our observations. Also, #5 is original and innovative; to our knowledge no one does it yet.

Goal #3:

Set benchmarks by which Georgia Tech can judge results after they have implemented their social media program

KDPaine & Partners' data provided summaries of activity for both Georgia Tech and the four peer institutions. As Georgia Tech enacts new programs, it can compare itself to these benchmarks to determine if it is meeting with success compared to its past, and compared to its peers.

It is tempting to anticipate that these effects will vary with certain attributes of institutions. For instance, we might expect that smaller schools, with their more cohesive social atmospheres, might have more success with social media programming than big public and private institutions. However, we tested the social bookmarking data for effects based on size of student body, size of incoming class and price of tuition; none of which were found to have an effect.

Of course, the more new programs are developed, the more new data will be available for future comparisons. What was very obvious in the data was that different institutions were trying to help to guide their social media content, though for the most part, it was organic, gritty and, well, natural. Using a horticulture analogy, we're talking about watching plants grow to figure out how we can use grafting and other techniques to get plants that we want.

Lessons learned

We learned early on that being very explicit and precise in our descriptions and definitions of coding parameters is essential. Most missteps were in the area of identifying tonality, which is very different in social media than it is in traditional media content analysis.

It was also necessary to establish consistent collection methodologies, particularly with Facebook and Social Bookmarking items.

Finally, in implementing similar programs for other institutions and organizations, we realized that the challenge isn't in establishing the benchmarks and best practices, but rather in getting the organizations to act on the recommendations.