

Social Media Channel Strategy Guidelines

Intro and Overview

In today's ever-evolving digital landscape, universities across the board face a dizzying array of social media platforms, with each promising unique audiences, engagement opportunities, and brand-building potential. The temptation to establish a presence everywhere is real, especially as peer institutions jump onto the latest trend. However, a truly effective social media strategy is not about ubiquity; it's about intentionality, focus, and alignment with institutional goals. Being strategic means making tough choices, investing resources wisely, and always letting audience needs — not industry FOMO — drive decisions. Being on a social media platform just for the sake of being on a social media platform is not a strategy. Being where your audience is, and showing up every day with purpose, creativity, and consistency is always the way to go.

Why Selectivity Matters

Resource Efficiency: Every new channel requires time, creative energy, and ongoing management. Spreading your team too thin dilutes quality and weakens your ability to respond, engage, and innovate.

Algorithms Are Like Brains: You can't just post anything on any platform. There are certain rules, regulations and expectations.

Audience Alignment: Not every platform attracts your target audiences. Without a clear understanding of where your prospective students, alumni, faculty, and partners spend their time, you risk shouting into the void. There's nothing more awkward and disappointing on social media than shouting into the void.

Brand Consistency: Maintaining a strong, coherent brand voice is easier when you focus on platforms that align with your institution's values, tone, and storytelling strengths.

Risk Management: Each platform brings its own risks, including data privacy, regulatory concerns, reputational pitfalls, and moderation challenges. Selectivity allows for better oversight and crisis preparedness.

Key Principles for Channel Selection

Know Your Audience Deeply

- **Research, Don't Assume:** Use analytics, surveys, and focus groups to understand where your core audiences are most active and how they prefer to engage.
- **Segment Strategically:** Different platforms serve different segments. LinkedIn may be best for alumni and industry partners, while Instagram and TikTok resonate with prospective undergraduates. Avoid the temptation to segment too narrowly. It might make sense for you to focus all of your attention on LinkedIn and Bluesky, rather than those two plus Facebook plus instagram, etc.

- **Monitor Shifts:** Audience behaviors change. Regularly reassess your assumptions and adapt as new trends or platforms emerge. Balance this with the need for patience. Resist making changes before 90 days to allow for accurate data.

Align with Institutional Goals

- **Purpose-Driven Presence:** Every channel should serve a clear purpose (i.e. brand awareness, recruitment, research dissemination, community building, etc.)
- **Quality Over Quantity:** It's better to excel on a few platforms than to be mediocre on many. Excellence drives engagement and builds trust.
- **Support Institutional Priorities:** Channel selection should reflect your university's mission, strategic plan, and available resources.

Evaluate Platform Fit

- **Cultural Alignment:** Does the platform's culture and content style fit your brand? For example, Reddit's preference for authenticity and peer-driven moderation may not suit all institutions.
- **Content Suitability:** Can you consistently produce the type of content (video, text, visuals, live streams) that the platform favors? If you can't, you should strongly consider skipping that platform.
- **Risk Profile:** Assess each platform's data privacy, moderation, and regulatory risks, especially with platforms such as TikTok or emerging decentralized networks like Bluesky.

Plan for Sustainable Engagement

- **Capacity Assessment:** Do you have the staff, skills, and tools to manage the platform well? Can you respond to comments, moderate AND analyze performance? Capacity matters from day one.
- **Long-Term Commitment:** Social media is a marathon, not a sprint. Avoid launching channels you can't sustain or that will languish after initial excitement fades. You'll need to fill those channels. And if you don't, abandoning them can be worse for a brand because the act of abandoning a platform in and of itself attracts (usually negative) attention.
- **Community Management:** Success is built on two-way engagement, not just broadcasting. Only commit to platforms where you can foster real dialogue. Be mindful that community management is a full-time job. You need to have the manpower to devote to a community manager. This is not an area where you can afford to cut corners, because you could miss something really important.

Don't Tell a Story, Tell the Right Story

- **Strategy First. Always:** Rather than matching content with a platform, think about the kind of content you want to share and decide what platform would work best

- Example: You have a short video, an infographic and an alum talking about how this thing changed their life. Decide where that content fits (Instagram, YouTube Shorts, Facebook, LinkedIn).

Red Flags: When Not to Join a Platform

- **“Everyone Else Is Doing It”** is not a strategy. Peer pressure is a poor substitute for audience insight and strategic fit.
- **No Clear Audience:** If your primary audiences aren’t there, your resources are better spent elsewhere.
- **Lack of Content Fit:** If you can’t create compelling, platform-appropriate content, your presence will underperform or even harm your brand.
- **Unmanageable Risk:** If data privacy, security, or reputational risks outweigh the benefits, it’s best to wait or abstain.

Strategic Channel Audit Checklist

Before launching (or continuing) a channel, ask:

1. Who is our target audience, and are they active here?
2. What unique value can we offer on this platform?
3. Do we have the resources to manage this channel effectively and sustainably?
4. How does this platform support our institutional goals and brand voice?
5. Are we prepared to manage the risks and responsibilities that come with this platform?

Conclusion: Intentionality Drives Impact

CMU must be strategic to the core to be successful in social media. The most successful universities will be those that resist the urge to be everywhere and instead focus on being exceptional where it matters most. Strategic selectivity is not about doing less—it’s about doing what matters, better. By grounding your channel strategy in audience insights, institutional priorities, and a commitment to quality engagement, your university can build a social media presence that is sustainable, impactful, and truly aligned with your mission.

If You Remember Nothing Else, Remember This:

It’s worth reiterating what was said at the top of this doc: Being on a social media platform just for the sake of being on a social media platform is not a strategy. Being where your audience is, and showing up every day with purpose, creativity, and consistency is always the way to go.