

Facebook Is Not Just for Kids: How Schools Can Tap Its Power in Communicating With Parents

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Facebook is the global community's social networking tool, with over 500 million users worldwide. To bring it closer to home, almost 1/5 of those users are in the United States, with 40% of the U.S. users in either California, Texas or New York. According to Facebook's own statistics as of March 2011, 35% of the users are 35 years and older, traditionally the age of parents of young school children. Parents will vary in their preferences for communication with their child's school. Some parents continue to rely on traditional forms of communication including on-site visits and reading notes sent home from teachers.

Even as some schools invite engagement through on-demand, web-based communication forums for the distribution of certain events, notifications and even grades, most schools remain committed to the use of email. While this form of communication may remain necessary for schools to reach their intended audience, Facebook should be considered as a viable companion, and possible future replacement for communicating with parents. Email may be the preferred choice of many parents who have yet to engage daily (or even hourly) on Facebook.

There are benefits.

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Rather than news getting lost in a news feed, parents may set up rules on their email that will put school messages into specific folders that can be easily viewed at any time in the day.

Email messages often include other pertinent information such as upcoming events, links to news about important legislation, and even practical items such as lunch menus and campus highlights - such multi-topic messages provide a brief snapshot at-a-glance with quick links to the school's website.

Some will remain dependent on emails to print reminders of important dates, events, and messages.

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However, for many who grow more and more accustomed to accessing Facebook on mobile devices, it is the addictive lure of Facebook's social communication that leaves some parents demanding and expecting to hear from their schools in the same venue. Even if they do not access it via a device in their hand, many Facebook users remain logged in to Facebook on their desktops, so, while not checking their news feed daily, they are peeking at it constantly. So, some of the noted benefits for schools to consider when using Facebook to communicate with parents:

Tapping into the parent who spends increasingly more and more time on Facebook during the day (some reports indicate over 7 hours a month, which for even some users seems low), thus communicating with the parent in a communication venue in which they are already spending a considerable amount of time on,

Accelerating the power of social sharing by posting notes, photos and video on the school's Facebook Page, thus increasing the opportunity for exposure as users click on the "Share" button from their news feed,

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Showcasing the school's shining moments and exemplary student achievements by using specific custom tabs on the school's Facebook Page to post sharing-rich content that will increase user engagement (and hopefully increase the number of fans who "like" the page).

Even in inclement weather, more and more parents are admitting that before the phone call from the school, or even the school closure announcement on the local TV or radio station, parents are using Facebook for breaking news alerts. While the students remain nestled in bed, parents snuggled in the sheets grab their smartphones to check their Facebook newsfeed for pertinent information without the noise and bright lights of radio or TV.

Schools, both public and private, have an increasing number of reasons to enhance their Facebook communication with parents. While other tools can be used, schools must face the reality that using Facebook as a communication tool is essential for reaching their primary audience when and where they are.

For more information:
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