

Social Media Strategies for School Principals

NASSP Bulletin
2014, Vol. 98(1) 5–25
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DOI: 10.1177/0192636513510596
bul.sagepub.com



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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study was to describe, analyze, and interpret the experiences of school principals who use multiple social media tools with stakeholders as part of their comprehensive communications practices. Additionally, it examined why school principals have chosen to communicate with their stakeholders through social media. Four themes emerged from the 12 qualitative interviews with the school principals and from the Internet data regarding their social media use. The four emergent themes included the following: (1) Social media tools allow for greater interactions between school principals and their stakeholders. (2) Social media tools provide stronger connections to local stakeholders, to fellow educators, and to the world. (3) Social media use can have a significant impact on a school principal's personal and professional growth. (4) Social media use is an expectation; it is no longer optional.

Keywords

communication, administrators, stakeholders, technology, schools

In late October 2007, researchers at Johns Hopkins University released a study that labeled approximately 2,000 high schools across the United States as “dropout factories” for graduating fewer than 60% of the students who enrolled as freshmen 4 years earlier (Zuckerbrod, 2007). The report generated a firestorm of reactions from school officials who denounced the study's simplistic formula for determining graduation rates, from parents and students who were concerned about the quality of education at their recently labeled schools, and from the media who seized upon a polarizing story that hit hardest in urban areas.

North High School (pseudonym), located in a Midwest state, was among the schools that found themselves on this infamous list. Although it later would

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be determined that the graduation rate was actually above 60%, few citizens paid attention to that fact. North had a reputation for being a tough, urban high school, and the Johns Hopkins study simply reinforced that stereotype. School and district officials attempted to control the damage in the local media, but the traditional ways in which they responded did little to change the court of public opinion.

The following year, the Great Plains Independent School District (pseudonym) received another unwanted distinction as five of its schools were named “Persistently Lowest-Achieving Schools” by the state Department of Education. Combined with the growing list of schools identified as “Schools in Need of Assistance” and the district’s label as a “District in Need of Assistance,” this event further perpetuated a negative image in the minds of stakeholders and citizens across the local region regarding the quality of education in the Great Plains Independent School District.

The recent adverse situations faced by the Great Plains Independent School District are not unique to that school district. Countless schools and districts around the country recently have faced negative circumstances. Newspapers across the nation have reported stories about students being bullied, athletes being hazed by teammates, school business managers misappropriating funds, and teachers engaging in misconduct with students. A school district’s timely, transparent response to these issues—or lack thereof—can help determine whether the impact of the stories is minimal or damaging.

The ever-expanding social media landscape has increased the opportunities for people to communicate with one another at any time and in any location. Smartphones, iPads, and other mobile technology devices permit a constant flow of two-way communication and information at home, walking down the street, or vacationing overseas. As interconnectedness continues to grow, our methods of personal and organizational communication have had to transform as well.

School officials, like their corporate and government counterparts, are learning that social media tools are exceedingly more powerful than they realized. Administrators often encounter similar instances of communication concerns and predicaments as other organizations. For example, the comment areas of online newspapers allow community members to anonymously post negative and inaccurate information regarding staff members, academic programs, and extracurricular offerings. Stakeholders who disagree with a district decision can create a Facebook page to unify like-minded community members in a movement to force out the superintendent or members of the board of education. Students can secretly videotape ineffective teachers and post to YouTube or Twitter to demean and degrade their instructors. And so on . . .

Social media tools are one method by which school principals could share with stakeholders their decision-making processes and school’s accomplishments on a regular basis using communication channels that those citizens prefer. Such sharing could proactively affect their public image. Frequent blog posts, tweets, updates to social networking sites, and the like could allow employees, students, parents, and community members to access information about the school at little to no cost at times that are convenient to stakeholders.

Just as the invention of the printing press did not supplant handwritten forms of communication, neither will the utilization of social media tools replace the traditional

ways in which school administrators share information with stakeholders (Carr, 2012). Social media tools will complement traditional formats as well as serve as a stimulus for changes in the way that information is shared back and forth.

Limited research has been conducted that describes the experiences of school principals who are using multiple social media tools with employees, students, parents, and community members as part of a comprehensive communications program. Social media strategies appear to have been implemented much faster in the corporate sector than in P-12 settings. Corporate officials have recognized that their employees and the general public use social media as one of their primary methods of finding, sharing, and creating information.

Existing research studies have focused on particular social media tools, such as the usage of blogs or podcasts (Engebritson, 2011; Hew, 2009; Stock, 2009). None of them, however, have examined the experiences of school principals who utilized multiple social media tools for their comprehensive communication efforts with stakeholders. The goal of this study was to learn from some of the most technology-savvy principals in the United States and Canada about how to implement comprehensive social media strategies in school organizations.

Previous Research

Effectively communicating school programs, curricula, and achievements has become increasingly more important, especially within the contexts of higher levels of accountability for student achievement, tighter budgets, and ever-increasing school choice options for parents. Bunnell (2005) found that very few schools had formal marketing plans. Oplatka and Hemsley-Brown (2004) declared that it was the responsibility of the field to develop knowledge that school principals could employ as they improve their school marketing efforts. Balancing face-to-face communication with integration of social media, school principals have an array of new tools and opportunities as they share information with stakeholders. These new technologies complement more traditional forms of communication instead of replacing them (Carr, 2012).

Apart from some articles authored by Nora Carr (2001, 2010, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c), Chief of Staff at Guilford (North Carolina) County Schools, scant research has been carried out regarding the use of social media tools by P-12 public school officials as part of an overall communications strategy. Moreover, few studies have been conducted that explore the resultant impact on the school administrators who use social media tools with their stakeholders. This study examined the ways in which comprehensive social media strategies can assist school administrators in augmenting their formal and informal communication with stakeholders and becoming more approachable to stakeholder groups.

Market Orientation, Relationship Marketing, and Social Customer Relationship Management

The theories of market orientation, relationship marketing, and social customer relationship management each contributed to the research framework utilized for this

study. Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2010) defined market orientation as “a set of beliefs that puts customers’—i.e., students’—interests first, in order to gain a competitive edge in the highly competitive global environment” (p. 205). The continued growth of the school choice movement and voucher programs serve as examples of why a school principal would want to put customers’ (students’) needs first and connect with them and their parents by way of social media tools.

Helfert, Ritter, and Walter (2002) found that market orientation underpins “the development and implementation of successful relationship marketing strategies in any organization.” Strategies such as these are essential components as school and district officials seek to hold on to existing students and appeal to prospective students. Market orientation “implies the responsibility and focus of the whole organization and its management of relations with consumers/users and other relevant stakeholder” (Pavičić, Alfirić, & Mihanović, 2009, p. 192). An atmosphere of innovation could arise which would benefit current and prospective customers (i.e., students) if customer satisfaction was the focus (Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2007).

Market orientation and relationship marketing increasingly have been applied to P-12 and higher education settings, expanding beyond the industrial and service markets (Al-Alak, 2006; Helgesen, 2008; Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2010; Kuster & Aviles-Valenzuela, 2010). Al-Alak (2006) defined relationship marketing as

A set of marketing activities or actions that attract, motivate, and enhance existing and potential students’ relationships as well as students’ parents, relatives, friends, reference groups for the benefit of all sides concerned, emphasizing on retaining existing students until their graduation, and attracting further students. (p. 4)

Relationship marketing is based on the idea of crafting a lifetime relationship with the customer (Helgesen, 2008). The ideas and stories that school principals could convey through social media tools likely could attract, motivate, enhance, and/or retain existing and potential relationships among all stakeholders, including students.

Customer relationship management (CRM) emerged out of the principles of relationship marketing in the 1990s as a method for the business sector to create long-term relationships with their customers through two-way communication (Askool & Nakata, 2010). It has been applied in the fields of business, information technology, and marketing. Pedron and Saccol (2009) defined the CRM philosophy as “. . . a deep understanding of what relationship means and of all implications related to establishing a relationship (such as trust, common objectives, increasing value on both sides, etc.)” (p. 38).

Social customer relationship management strategies emerged in the late 2000s. Social customer relationship management, also known as “CRM 2.0,” became popular due to the sharp rise in the use of social media tools and personal technology devices (Greenberg, 2010). Employees at corporations, nonprofits, and government agencies utilizing CRM 2.0 strategies have used social media tools to establish and maintain relationships with their customers and stakeholders.

Greenberg (2010) defined CRM 2.0 as follows:

CRM 2.0 is a philosophy & a business strategy, supported by a technology platform, business rules, processes and social characteristics, designed to engage the customer in a collaborative conversation in order to provide mutually beneficial value in a trusted & transparent business environment. It's the company's response to the customer's ownership of the conversation. (p. 413)

This study was constructed on a model of using social media tools both to establish and maintain relationships with customers (the stakeholders of the school) and to engage them in collaborative conversations in a trusted and transparent environment. School principals quite often find themselves taking part in collaborative conversations with stakeholders about a wide range of topics such as changes to academic programming, extracurricular activities, and finances. Such discussions are expected to be held in a trusting and transparent manner.

Purpose of the Study

Very little peer-reviewed literature exists which illustrates the experiences of school principals who have been using myriad social media tools as part of their comprehensive communication efforts with employees, students, parents, and community members. Moreover, little research has been conducted regarding the reasons why school principals have adopted social media tools for communication purposes. Accordingly, the two guiding research questions for this study adopted an exploratory perspective:

1. What are the experiences of school principals who use multiple social media tools such as blogs, microblogs (e.g., Twitter), social networking sites (e.g., Facebook), podcasts, and online videos to communicate with employees, students, parents, and community members?
2. Why are school principals choosing to communicate with employees, students, parents, and community members through multiple social media tools?

This research study expanded the knowledge base by uncovering some of the methods by which school principals are using social media tools as part of a wide-ranging communications strategy with stakeholders. Our research centered on the practices of school principals who have combined traditional forms of information-sharing (e.g., newsletters, e-mails, etc.) with social media tools (e.g., blogs, microblogs, social networking tools, podcasts, and online video) to create a more far-reaching communication approach for the people whom they serve.

Method

School principals from across the United States and Canada were selected to take part in this research study. Participants from urban, suburban, and rural school districts were purposefully selected in order to increase the relevance of the findings. Principals from schools in four different regions of the United States and Canada were inter-

viewed in order to discern how social media tools had been integrated into the comprehensive communication practices of their urban, suburban, and rural school settings.

The school principals who participated in this study were selected through purposeful sampling, which also has been termed *purposeful selection* or *criterion-based selection* (Maxwell, 2005). Purposeful sampling “is a strategy in which particular settings, persons, or activities are selected deliberately in order to provide information that can’t be gotten as well from other choices” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 88). Yin (2011) wrote that “the goal or purpose for selecting the specific study units is to have those that will yield the most relevant and plentiful data, given your topic of study” (p. 88). Purposeful selection ensured that the school principals in this study used at least two social media tools as part of their comprehensive communications practices with stakeholders.

The search for social media-savvy school principals initially centered on highly visible practitioners from across the United States and Canada who blogged and tweeted as methods of sharing information with their employees, students, parents, and community members. Initial Google searches using terms such as “school principals who blog” generated websites such as Connected Principals (<http://www.connectedprincipals.com>). As potential interview subjects were identified, the frequency of their blogging and tweeting was examined to determine which subjects might be contacted. The search was narrowed by assessing which prospective participants also had a social networking site for their school as well as podcasts and online videos. These searches resulted in a list of 24 prospective school principals from 21 U.S. states and 1 Canadian province. The list was broken down into four regions—with six participants per region—using categories designated by the U.S. Census Bureau. The ultimate goal was to get three principals from each region to take part in the study.

The U.S. Census Bureau utilizes four regions in their division of states: Northeast, Midwest, South, and West (see the appendix). Table 1 provides a summary of the participants by region, school type, and years of experience.

Data Collection Methods

Telephone interviews were conducted with each of the 12 principals who agree to participate. The study also included an analysis of the principals’ usage of social media tools. The 12 study participants used at least two of the following social media tools as part of their communications with stakeholders: blogs, microblogs (e.g., Twitter), social networking sites (e.g., Facebook), podcasts, and online videos.

A semistructured approach was utilized for the qualitative interviews in this study (Yin, 2011). First, the relationship between the school principals and the researcher was not strictly scripted. The interview was composed of 11 standard questions but the wording of the questions, the wording of the probing questions, and the order in which the questions were asked differed according to the flow of each of the conversations. Second, the interviews followed an informal style rather than a scripted one, allowing each interview to be personalized to the needs of the participant and to provide a more social relationship between subject and interviewer. Third, the interviews were composed of open-ended questions so that participants could offer detailed responses rather than one-word answers.

Table 1. Principals.

Region	Code	School type	Years of experience as a school administrator
Northeast	NE-P-1	Suburban	15
Northeast	NE-P-2	Urban	7
Northeast	NE-P-3	Suburban	8
South	SO-P-1	Rural	5
South	SO-P-2	Urban	13
South	SO-P-3	Suburban	6
Midwest	MW-P-1	Suburban	4
Midwest	MW-P-2	Rural	4
Midwest	MW-P-3	Rural	14
West	WE-P-1	a	5
West	WE-P-2	a	11
West	WE-P-3	Suburban	8
			Mean = 8.33

a. Canadian school district. No designation available.

According to Yin (2009), qualitative interviews “cater to the interviewee’s schedule and availability” and not the researcher’s (p. 85). Two of the 12 interviews conducted for this study took place on a Sunday, 1 took place on a holiday, 1 took place during winter break, 5 took place after school hours, and 3 took place during school hours: all at the request of the participants. The participant-selected time slots enabled the individuals to talk in-depth about the specific social media tools that each used when communicating with stakeholders, to talk about their overall experiences using social media, and to talk about why they had chosen to use social media with stakeholders.

The telephone interviews lasted an average of 26 minutes each. The primary investigator received permission from each participant to use NoNotesVoice.com, a third-party service, to record each of the calls and obtain a transcript of the conversations, typically within two business days. The transcriptions were not completely accurate, so the primary researcher listened to each interview and made the necessary corrections to the transcripts to reflect what was actually said.

Data Analysis

There are five steps to follow in the analysis of qualitative data as described by Yin (2011): compiling, disassembling, reassembling and arraying, interpreting, and concluding. The primary researcher compiled the data by gathering the interview transcriptions and other data on each participant’s social media use. He adhered to the advice of Maxwell (2005) and started to organize and analyze the data immediately after conducting the first interview. Interesting quotes were highlighted and emergent themes were identified. This process involved searching for common responses to questions

and key words that participants provided. The data were coded so that they could be grouped and regrouped in multiple ways in preparation for reassembling. After the data were reassembled, it was interpreted based on the themes that emerged. Finally, the primary researcher drew conclusions and chose the methods by which to represent the findings. This reiterative process allowed the researcher to fully examine the emergent themes and helped ensure the validity and reliability of the data analysis.

Limitations and Delimitations

This study was limited to the perceptions of school principals regarding their experiences using social media tools to communicate with stakeholders. The study did not examine how stakeholders perceived the information that they received from their school principals. Additionally, the study did not provide an analysis of who read the blogs, followed the tweets, “liked” their school’s social networking site, listened to the podcasts, or viewed the uploaded videos. This research study did not examine stakeholders’ preferences for receiving school communication via social media tools rather than by traditional forms of communication such as newsletters, e-mail, and phone calls. Each of these topics could be the base of a separate research study. This study focused on the unique experiences and perspectives of school principals who actively use social media tools with their stakeholders.

This qualitative case study was delimited to school principals who use at least two social media tools in their communications with stakeholders. The purposefully selected participants actively blogged, tweeted, posted on their school’s social networking site, created podcasts, and either created videos to be uploaded or uploaded existing videos as part of their blog.

Finally, the study was not delimited to a specific type of school (e.g., urban, suburban, or rural) or region. Nine of the U.S. and Canadian school districts were urban or suburban. The remaining three were rural. The study took a broad look at social media use by school principals from across the United States and Canada in order to provide findings that would be more generalizable.

Findings

Four themes emerged from the 12 qualitative interviews with the school principals and from the Internet data regarding their social media use. The four emergent themes included the following:

1. Social media tools allow for greater *interactions* between school principals and their stakeholders.
2. Social media tools provide stronger *connections* to local stakeholders, to fellow educators, and to the world.
3. Social media use can have a significant *impact* on a school principal’s personal and professional growth.
4. Social media use is an *expectation*; it is no longer optional.

Each theme is discussed in more detail below.

Interactions

Numerous participants provided responses that contributed to the development of the first theme: *interactions*. After asking about length of service in their current administrative role and as a school administrator overall, participants were asked to discuss how their communication with stakeholders has changed over the past 5 years. This gave the respondents the opportunity to begin the interview with some reflection about how their communication with stakeholders has changed in a relatively short period of time:

Interview Question 3: *How has the way that you communicate with stakeholders (community members, employees, parents, and students) changed over the past 5 years?*

Ten of the 12 participants referred to the movement away from paper forms of communication in favor of electronic options such as social media tools. A principal from the South shared how communication between school administrators and stakeholders has evolved at his school to include Twitter:

We had a parents' coffee where I spoke for an hour and a half to the junior high parents who wanted to attend and provided a little program about our "Learning for Life" vision statement. I had one of my colleagues tweet the questions and conversations so that other faculty who couldn't attend and other parents who couldn't attend could follow along virtually.

Seven of the 12 participants referred to the movement from one-way communication to two-way dialogue with stakeholders: "I think the more people you have in the conversation that the more powerful, the more meaningful it is," said a principal from the Northeast. He then shared a compelling quote about the importance of bringing people into the conversation:

I don't know who said this quote about "the smartest person in the room is the room," so I just feel like the more people we can bring into the room to help us with the discussion, that may give us access to a new perspective a bit.

Social media tools such as blogs and Twitter can potentially facilitate "bringing more people into the room" and extend the dialogues between school officials and stakeholder groups. Those discussions often can provide deeper, richer exchanges that might foster stronger solutions to the questions at hand. Those new perspectives could yield better benefits for all involved.

Extending access to conversations was one important change that a principal from the West region noted. He elaborated on the changes to traditional forms of

communication, such as the school newsletter. Instead of continuing the time-honored tradition of sending out school news once a month, information is now available instantly and in multiple forms:

We've taken our newsletter and now do it as a blog, so you're putting information out there in a more timely fashion. You're not waiting 'til the end of the month when it happens. You're posting it on the blog and parents can read it and respond. When we post it on the blog it goes to our Facebook page, which goes to our Twitter account and basically, you're kind of meeting parents and community members where they are.

These principals discovered that they could get feedback quickly and efficiently from their stakeholders by sharing the school information through a variety of social media outlets. By using blogs, microblogs, and social networking sites to "meet parents and community members where they are" the principals were able to engage their constituent communities in discussions about issues, survey them about their opinions, and understand their expectations. These new tools also gave the school principals access to conversations to which they might never have had access in the past.

Connections

Many of the principals mentioned *connections* as one of the factors that caused them to begin using social media tools with stakeholders. A principal in the Northeast spoke passionately about the subject and conveyed his belief that social media is a powerful tool to connect students to a world of opportunities and knowledge:

The idea that [technology] can allow kids to create and research and connect and network and produce more powerfully is really important to me. I think that if we just rely on the idea that all of the knowledge anybody needs is contained within the room and the entire audience that we need is contained within the room, we miss a powerful opportunity for kids, and to me that's wrong. By having access to the most interesting, the most cutting-edge data they can . . . that's powerful, and to me, to miss that opportunity is to deny kids access to the world that they live in today. I think the other thing is that kids can be authentic voices. Things that kid can write can make a difference in the world. Why wouldn't we do that? Why wouldn't we allow for that?

A second principal from the Northeast region talked about the connections he had made with notable figures in the field of education, such as Diane Ravitch, Research Professor of Education at New York University: "Not only do we tweet, but we've direct messaged back and forth . . . How cool is that?" He continued by sharing how social media has increased his connections to fellow educators:

I've had conversations with Robert Marzano, members of the U.S. Department of Education, so many other authors and speakers that . . . never in a million years would I have ever come across these people except maybe at a professional conference, and I never even went to a major annual conference until I got connected.

Prior to the advent of social media tools, access to prominent figures in education was limited. Only those individuals who worked in or near experts' universities or institutions—or who attended workshops or conferences where the noted figures spoke—had the ability to interact with them. Through social media tools such as blogs and Twitter, two-way dialogue with individuals such as Diane Ravitch, Todd Whitaker, and Robert Marzano has been opened up. School principals in any location could engage with them in a chat session on Twitter, respond to their blog posts, and even find a comment from a noted figure on the school principal's blog or Twitter account. This access to leading commentators and education scholars has flattened the process of educational reform and given school officials everywhere the opportunity to create world-class schools.

Connectedness to students, staff, the community, and the profession also came through in several other responses. The principals talked about how the use of social media tools had strengthened that feeling of *connectedness*, which had not happened as noticeably through traditional forms of communication. A principal from the South shared an analogy about how using social media tools as an administrator can keep principals connected to education and the world that students are entering:

I think I can be a better educator by practicing. I think the best football coaches play football. The best running coaches actually are runners. The best instrumental music teachers actually play an instrument, so to help students navigate the world that they are inheriting, I want to be practicing those things that we believe the world will be more connected with Web 2.0 tools. So I need to stay on that edge of learning myself.

Five of the dozen principals stated that the quality and/or the quantity of their relationships had grown either as a direct or indirect benefit of their social media use. A Northeast principal had several insightful comments to share that really exemplified this theme:

I love tweeting out or posting out . . . when I'm watching an Eagles game. You would think, "That's no big deal. Who cares?" Except then, when parents and students are commenting on those threads and interacting with their child's principal in a way that breaks down that barrier, it makes it that much easier for them to come into the office, or come in to the school when it does matter.

As he continued to talk, he shared some powerful insights about the broader effect this type of communication could have:

So the notion that we can use social media to humanize each other, and to break down some of the traditional barriers that may exist between school and home, and the idea that every parent brings the ghost of every parent meeting they ever had when they were a student into their child's educational experience. That can break down . . . we can use social media to humanize one another, and that is an outgrowth of really authentic use of it, that's powerful! And that's really interesting to me.

A principal from the Midwest sheepishly noted how social media had affected his relationships, stating that “I guess I have developed some relationships with people I have never met that I would have never known, and that adds a richness to both my personal life and to my career.”

These quotes exemplify the myriad ways in which engaging with stakeholders through social media tools can benefit a school principal. In larger school systems, students, parents, and community members may not really get to know the principal of the school on a personal level. The act of sharing innocuous things such as thoughts on an NFL game or supportive comments to a student who is struggling with a homework assignment could, over time, remove some of the barriers between stakeholders and the principal. That humanization process and vulnerability could lead to increased parental involvement and other benefits. As the participants stated, the impact could be profound, the time investment is minimal, and a richness may manifest in the school administrator’s online life.

Impact

Social media use could have a significant impact on one’s personal and professional growth. Data from the principals revealed that there were several areas of impact worth noting, including their own professional development, their own personal (or professional) learning network (PLN), their transparency, and their confidence and image in the eyes of stakeholders.

Impact: Professional Development and PLNs. Eleven of the 12 school principals commented on the impact that social media has had on their own professional learning. Eight of those 11 referenced the impact of a PLN. A principal from the Northeast shared how his PLN of over 10,000 people had benefited him:

I’ve built a tremendous resource for myself and my school now because pretty much any question on any educational topic I have whether it’s an old topic or a brand-new topic . . . I have over 10,000 educators all over the globe that I can rely on if I need help or I have a question on something. It’s a pretty phenomenal resource.

The individualized nature of the PLN can be very motivating. As one principal said, “I feel my learning has grown exponentially because, through the establishment of my own Personal Learning Network, I’m allowed to finally solely focus on areas of educational leadership, pedagogy, and technology integration that interest me.” Similarly, a principal from the South shared how valuable it is to be able to get quick responses from his PLN colleagues: “I literally can post an issue or an idea or follow, and on Twitter, and immediately 15 or 20 people respond and say, ‘Have you tried this?’ or they’ll send me a link to something.” Summing up his thoughts he said, “That kind of connection wasn’t possible before social media came along.”

A principal from the West had similar sentiments about getting feedback from a PLN: “I think professional development has been the real key, like learning

from different educators in different jurisdictions in different countries with different situations. That's . . . been a real benefit." He continued by commenting about the broad range of feedback he receives from his PLN: "You can really locate resources for your school quickly on virtually any topic in education. You can bounce your ideas off of other people which is really neat and you actually get feedback from them."

School principals who only have experienced whole-group professional development might find the individualized focus of a PLN very appealing. The strength of the PLN as a tool for personal and professional growth is found in the ability to suit it to the needs of the individual. The impact generated from interacting and connecting with others in the field of education with similar interests or with noted figures could lead to new ways of thinking and a motivation to continue learning and growing.

Impact: Transparency. Some of the school principals stated that social media had impacted them by creating greater levels of transparency. The principals were able to express their thinking to stakeholders more clearly through social media tools, which was seen as desirable. A principal from the South provided a good segue between the PLN aspect of *impact* and the concept of *transparency*. He noted that ". . . being able to communicate quickly, easily, and efficiently . . . about my own learning and sharing my questions and comments about what I'm thinking" was important to him. He went on to phrase it as a "we are smarter than me" type of idea. A principal from the Northeast shared his perspective on *transparency* in the context of prospective families that were considering moving into his school's attendance zone: "You get a pretty good handle on who we are without ever visiting the school, so a lot of people like the transparency that's available."

Higher levels of transparency could lead to higher levels of trust between school officials and stakeholders. It would be possible to create a transparent environment through traditional forms of communication, such as newsletters and articles in newspapers. However, by using social media tools in conjunction with traditional formats, it could be easier to create such an atmosphere. Any of the five social media categories highlighted in this study could serve as a vehicle through which to convey background information and supplementary materials that support the decisions and changes being implemented in a school. The use of multiple social media tools can complement the traditional ways of sharing information to achieve high levels of transparency.

Impact: Confidence. Four principals also stated that either their own image or their school's image had been enhanced as a result of social media use. A principal from the West shared how his interactions with his PLN had given him a boost of confidence: "It's helped my career out in a huge way because I'm confident when I speak about something." That boost of confidence that he felt then allowed him to engage in discussions that could be divisive. For example, he noted that, "I know that I've already had this conversation with other people, so you kind of have an idea what people are going to say when you want to bring up something a bit more controversial."

Two principals from the Northeast shared how the images of their schools had been impacted positively due to the social media use by the principals. One said, ". . . the

benefit to the community is that we are seen as a model (school).” A second principal, reflecting on the past 3 years, stated, “. . . We were an ordinary school . . . Now we are seeing a transformation in the teaching and learning process and a lot of it could be directly linked to when we started with our social media presence.”

Expectation

Ten of the 12 school principals made statements that directly reflected the use of social media tools by their peers. The remaining two school principals spoke about the expectation of using social media without expressly stating it.

When asked what advice they would give to a school administrator who is thinking about using social media tools with stakeholders as part of a communications strategy, three school principals said, “Jump in!” Two responded with the mantra “Lurk and learn.” Three cautioned, “Don’t be afraid.” Two gave insightful quotes about the non-negotiable aspect of using social media as a communications tool.

A principal from the West began his advice by saying, “I would start carefully . . . you have to lurk a little bit and learn. It’s a different culture, right?” After suggesting that, he continued his advice, “My first response was just, ‘Jump in!’ You do need to just say, ‘I’m gonna do it.’ You’ve got to seriously try it for . . . six weeks. So, try Twitter for six weeks and just connect with people.”

He continued the interview by providing advice on avoiding controversial topics and the importance of lurking and learning before he returned once more to the theme of jumping in. Continuing on, he said, “(S)o I would say, ‘Jump in, but jump in sort of slowly, if you can jump in slow. It’s kind of hard to do. Wade in and stick with it. That’s the biggest thing.’”

“Just jump in! Do it! Get involved!” remarked a second principal from the West. He continued his advice by saying,

I think as an educator you have to demonstrate a willingness to learn and try new things. Certainly, we want our staff to do that. Certainly, we want our kids to do that, so I think if we don’t jump in and get involved, then we can’t really be leaders that way.

Many of the school principals found that augmenting their traditional forms of communication with the addition of social media tools has many benefits. As a result, they encouraged nonusers to get started even if it meant just trying a social media tool for a few weeks. They provided reassurance that it would not be hard to learn and that the act of learning itself is important to model for employees, students, parents, and community members.

The idea of “lurking and learning” was mentioned by two different principals. The term signifies the act of entering the social media world as an observer first in order to see how a specific tool is used. After learning the ins and outs of the tool(s), the participant could then start engaging others in a more productive way. As one of the principals in the West stated, “I would start by sort of lurking a little bit, learning the culture of social media, how people use it. But stick with it. That’s the biggest thing.”

A Northeast principal shared three tips: “Pick one or two tools. Develop a strategy for how you’re going to use the tool and then ‘lurk and learn.’” He went on to define his advice by saying, “meaning just watch what other administrators are doing. Look at how they are interacting. Look at the information they are sending out. That’s how I learned.”

When asked to give advice to a school administrator who is thinking about using social media tools with stakeholders, a principal from the South had strong words to say. He said, “I believe that social media as a communications tool will become the new non-negotiable . . . and if we choose not to tap into this . . . then we are ineffective as an administrator.” A principal from the Midwest concurred, noting, “The best advice I would have is do not be afraid of it. You absolutely, positively, actually have to embrace it.” A principal from the West encouraged modeling of social media tools as well as not fearing them: “To me, modeling is the biggest thing, and just not being afraid of it, and trying to get in, and try it out.”

If a school principal has not yet begun to use social media professionally, it might be a little intimidating. These quotes provide encouragement that there is little to fear. Similar to the previous quotes regarding just “jumping in,” the message delivered by these principals was to try out a social media tool and start using it.

The final aspect of *expectation* mentioned by school principals was that the use of social media tools was nonnegotiable. A principal in the South stated it straightforwardly: “It’s going to be non-negotiable. That’s how everybody is going to communicate because it’s so effective and it’s cheap. It doesn’t cost anything.” He went on to say, “And so, as administrators, I think we are ineffective if we are not using these free, proven effective strategies to communicate.”

Two other principals also stated the same opinion more eloquently and in stronger language. For instance, one of the Northeast principals concluded his interview by sharing these thoughts on the use of social media tools by school administrators:

I think to really do the job we need to as school leaders, we need to make sure we see what’s going on in other schools, and other states, and other countries, because our job is to obviously prepare kids for a global economy that I still don’t think a lot of people understand. So, to me it’s a no brainer. I just think it’s, honestly, other people have said it’s educational malpractice not to take advantage of these resources and not only to use them yourself, but to show others how to use them.

Another principal from the South elaborated on the importance of blogging and tweeting as an educator, administrator, or school leader:

I kind of consider the Blogosphere and the Twittersphere among educators to be the best faculty lounge in the universe and to not participate in that sort of positive virtual faculty lounge, to me, seems irresponsible as a principal and school leader; to not tap into that wisdom and experience and innovative thinking that’s happening there.

The 12 school principals who took part in this research study each have been using at least two forms of social media. They have been blogging for as little as half a year to as long as 8½ years. Seven of the 12 have written 101 to 500 blog posts over that

time. They have been active on Twitter for 1 to 5 years. Eight of the 12 have sent over 5,000 tweets. Nine of the 12 have more than 1,001 followers. They have experienced the positive benefits from using social media tools professionally. Each of them believed that it is no longer optional for school administrators in the 21st century to use social media tools and they highly encouraged school principals who have not yet done so to jump in and start using them.

Implications for School Administrators

School principals in this research study advised administrators who have not been using social media tools in their professional role to “jump in” and start using them. The participants conceded that not having enough time to learn how to use the tools is a common fear among those who have not yet made the leap. Additional fears could include not having enough time to devote to two-way communication with stakeholders or not getting those stakeholders to engage with their school’s principal through these new methods.

Those fears can be conquered relatively easily. The components of a comprehensive communications strategy likely exist already. The first step is to reframe the mind-set of stakeholder/school communication to recognize the value that two-way conversations with employees, students, parents, and community members creates. Then existing communication practices can be evaluated to determine which ones can be converted into a 21st-century communications strategy.

Blogs

Blogs easily facilitate the sharing of content with stakeholders; hence, they are the first element of a comprehensive communications strategy. Most school principals share information with their stakeholders through weekly or monthly newsletters and bulletins. It would be easy to copy and paste that content in to a blog post and share it electronically. Stakeholders could easily access it at their convenience, which is one of the biggest advantages of a blog (Weil, 2006). Additionally, converting the traditional newsletter content to a blog takes little extra time since the content has already been prepared.

Since writing several blog posts in one sitting and scheduling them for publication on separate days is easy to do, it makes blogging an attractive piece of a comprehensive communications strategy. Participants from this research study shared that they found it very advantageous to be able to allocate time 1 day a week to write their blog posts and then schedule them to appear periodically during the following week or month. Existing literature supports the importance of keeping a regular routine to retain followers (Handley & Chapman, 2011; Schwartz, 2005; Scott, 2010; Teich, 2008; Weil, 2006).

Finally, blogging has been determined to benefit school administrators even if two-way conversations are slow to develop between the leaders and their stakeholders. In this study, the connections that developed between stakeholders/administrator were one of the emergent themes that surfaced as participants discussed blogging. Increased transparency was a second emergent theme that supported blogging.

Twitter

The second recommended element of a comprehensive communications strategy is the use of Twitter. It is free, easy to create an account, and relatively easy to use. At first, the school principal who has just joined Twitter may wish to “lurk and learn,” which was the advice from several participants. Much can be learned by observing the content that others post as well as the conversations that are simultaneously taking place. She also could begin tweeting about school events, student accomplishments, and classroom visits. She could jump in with questions for her new PLN regarding questions about instructional strategies, staff development ideas, and much more.

It will be important to let the school’s stakeholders know that the principal has begun using Twitter as a two-way communications tool with them. One way to alert stakeholders would be to post the latest tweets on the school’s website. Adding a Twitter icon to the page would also grab stakeholder attention. Additionally, the principal may wish to place the Twitter ID on the school administrator’s e-mail signature, business cards, and letterhead (Hughes, 2010).

Apart from the two-way communication that Twitter affords, the administrator who has just joined Twitter can begin building her own PLN that is individualized to her exact professional needs. Participants from this study stated that those PLN connections brought about great relational value as well as access to the latest in best practices. Through Twitter, location and tight budgets were no longer barriers as school principals from rural, suburban, and urban districts could have access to leading experts in the field. The administrators did not have to travel to regional or national conferences to get the access; it was instantly available to them.

Another feature of Twitter that made it a vital part of a comprehensive communications strategy was accessibility. Stakeholders and school administrators alike could access Twitter from a Smartphone, an iPad, or a laptop. Given the prevalence of personal technology devices among the populace, the ease of accessibility could accelerate greater interactions between and among stakeholders and school principals as they dialogue with one another in two-way communication about issues affecting the local school or school district.

Blogs and Twitter are two easy tools that are recommended for school principals who have not yet begun to use social media tools in their communications with stakeholders. The administrator likely has the existing content that could be broadcasted through those two avenues. The final task is to learn how to share the content via social media.

Implications for Educational Leadership Preparation Programs

Educational leadership preparation program coordinators should take note of the findings from this research study and begin incorporating aspects of social media communication into their programs of study. Participants from this study referred to the use of social media as “nonnegotiable” and “required” for administrators. Prospective school principals should gain experiences with each of the five identified components

of a comprehensive communications strategy prior to taking on their first leadership position.

Prospective school principals should work with a mentor to learn how to create an effective and engaging blog post that not only shares important information but also solicits a response from the reader. The prospective administrator should learn how to tweet, engage in chats, and establish a PLN, for continued personal and professional growth.

In addition, a prospective school principal should become proficient in social networks, podcasts, and online video. Candidates likely already know how to post and share content on a social networking site such as Facebook. Prospective school principals should gain experience creating and monitoring an organizational page, perhaps for the school or district where they currently serve. Finally, they should learn how to create and share information by way of podcasts and online video.

Each of these five components could assist a new school principal in more effectively communicating with internal and external stakeholders. The art and science of effectively doing just that could lead to higher levels of success and satisfaction for both the administrator and the stakeholders involved.

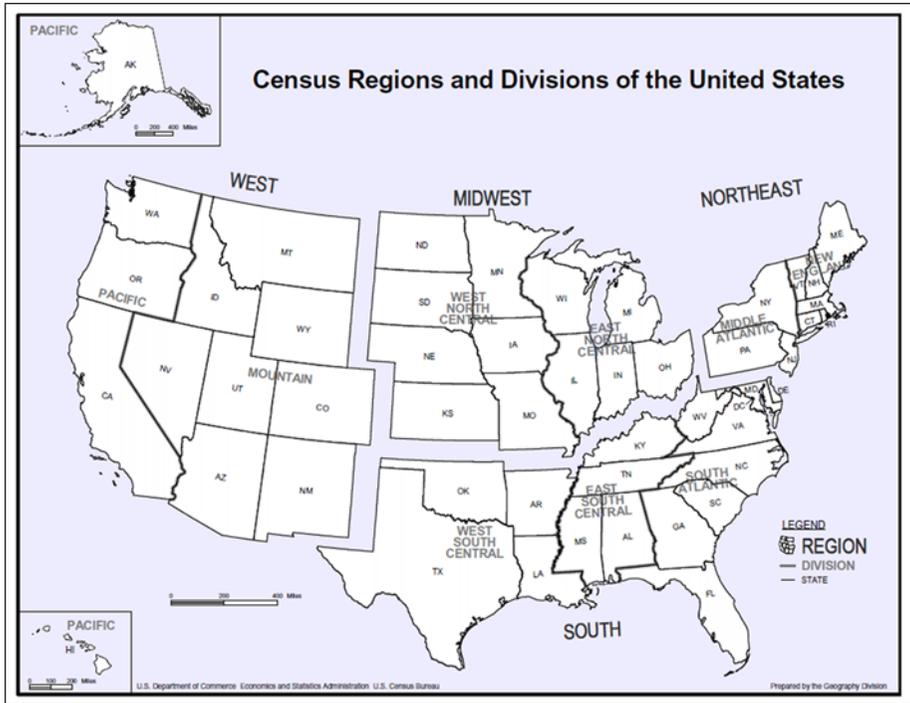
Conclusion

The goal of this research study was to understand the practices and perspectives of social media-savvy school principals. As the findings indicate, school administrators simply cannot afford to ban social media or turn their backs on this important communication tool. Employees in the business world have had to embrace social media tools to stay competitive and meet the demands of the marketplace. The education world moves slower regarding change initiatives, perhaps due to the relative lack of competition. As information and technology continue to make rapid advances and as the ability to access and share information instantly with others becomes even more prevalent, school principals and superintendents will have to adapt their practices to include social media tools. The use of social media soon will no longer be optional.

The results of this study revealed numerous findings that could encourage school principals to begin using social media in their professional role. Blogs, Twitter, social networking sites, podcasts, and online videos were found to be effective communication tools with which to engage stakeholders in two-way conversations. They also enhanced the professional development of the school leader, which could lead to greater interactions with stakeholders. Social media use was found to provide greater transparency regarding the decision-making process. They also could lead to stronger connections to stakeholders and beyond. The administrators in this study believe that we have reached the point where these tools are no longer optional but instead are integral components of effective, 21st-century school leadership.

Appendix

U.S. Census Bureau Regions



Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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