



Date: Thursday, September 23, 2010

To: Management & Coordinating Committee (Committee I)

From: David Weir, Communications Manager

Subject: Implementation of social media tools

PURPOSE

To provide Trustees with information on the use of social media tools as part of the school district's communications and public engagement strategy.

BACKGROUND

In June 2009, the Communications Department prepared a strategic communications plan that identified a number of communications vehicles the school district was either not using, or that are not in line with a larger communications strategy. The strategic plan suggested further study was needed in the area of social media, including Facebook and Twitter.

At the time, the primary reason for not employing social media tools was social networking sites were blocked and inaccessible to computers on the school district's network.

In early 2010, Superintendent of Schools Steve Cardwell directed the school district's Internet connection opened up to allow access to a host of social media and networking sites previously inaccessible.

In August, Communications undertook a survey of the landscape and reviewed numerous articles in advance of preparing a social media protocol and community management plan.

Communications also laid the groundwork for implementation of a social media strategy by establishing a VSB Facebook page and VSB Twitter account. Activity to date has been limited, but is increasing as part of an integrated communications strategy.

BENEFITS OF SOCIAL MEDIA TOOLS

Improves access to school district information: In the past five years, there has been a shift in the way people consume their news. A decade ago traditional media – print, TV and radio – topped the list of sources people looked to for their news. Traditional media outlets remain major sources for news, however, there is a growing shift towards the personalized news stream.

Social networks – Facebook, Twitter, etc. – have become a personalized news wire that is customizable based on tastes and likes simply by selecting the feeds that interest most. If an organization wants to be seen, it must release information in a way that allows it to be included in this personalized news streams.

Effective public relations always required a mix of communications styles and vehicles to reach audiences where they hang out. Today, it means we cannot solely on traditional media outlets – we need to be on social networks.

That said, it must be stressed that social media tools are not solitary tools, but rather are meant to complement the existing mix of communications vehicles.

Provides a vehicle to release timely information: The school district has relies on its website and traditional media to release time-sensitive information about temporary and weather-related school closures, public meetings and consultations. While this information is reaching its target audience, those already accessing Facebook and Twitter as part of their daily routine may receive the information more quickly, and without additional effort on the part of the user.

Increase website traffic: The VSB's redesigned website can be an effective vehicle for allowing the district to tell its stories, but it's only effective if people have reason to visit the website, and not everyone will check regularly for updates. Using social media tools to tease new information on the district website can drive people towards the website, potentially drawing in new users and increasing web traffic.

Broadcasting versus listening: The value of social media – and really Web 2.0 – is in the conversations that can happen. If we simply use social media as a means to send out press releases and updates, we fail to fully utilize the medium. Using social media as a listening and communicating tool is another means towards building trust in the VSB brand.

Allows for metrics: It is difficult to measure the effectiveness of newsletters and newspaper ads unless there is a specific call to action that occurs nowhere else. Online, however, it is much easier to measure and track campaigns by looking at statistics on site activity. Yet, in order to measure the success of social media tools, we need to identify what we wish to measure because not all measurements produce perfect data.

Requires little commitment/effort from user: Social media tools allow the user to decide how passive or active they are in their online interactions. Once a user becomes a fan of an organization's Facebook page or follows the organization on Twitter, users can receive and review new information at their own time and convenience. The user will no longer have to actively seek out updates – the updates will be delivered to their inbox.

The tools also give users the opportunity to comment/post.

The school district can join existing conversations: Conversations about the school district are already taking place on various social media sites. Staying out of the conversation will not prevent the comments – both positive and negative – from being posted. It simply means the district is not in a position to respond and correct inaccurate information. Joining the conversation provides social media users with a legitimate source of school district information.

It should be stated that the district's Facebook page can be closed to user comments, however, this is not recommended for public organizations as it goes against the goal of improving public engagement.

Cost: Social media tools typically represent a low-cost opportunity for marketing and public engagement because the tools have already been developed and deployed by third parties.

However, there is staff time required to develop VSB-specific content, strategy and on-going community management. While the initial launch and basic ongoing use can be achieved by reallocating existing communications resources, should trustees wish to increase the level of community engagement, further conversations will be needed about how district resources are managed to achieve the desired outcome.

It is, therefore, necessary to establish and clearly articulate early on the expectations for the social media program to avoid problems down the road.

ROLLOUT PLAN

Communications is planning to gradually introduce social media tools in the course of the 2010-11 school year.

Phase 1: September-December 2010

- Introduce Facebook as a pilot project managed by the Communications Department. In this initial phase, the school district's Facebook page will be used to broadcast information about updates to www.vsb.bc.ca and direct users to the district website for more information. It will also be used as another avenue for announcing calendar events, including board meetings, public consultations and key registration dates.
- Introduce Twitter as a pilot project management by the Communications Department. As with Facebook, the school district's Twitter account will initially be used to broadcast information about updates to www.vsb.bc.ca and direct users to the district website for more information. It will also be used as another avenue for announcing calendar events, including board meetings, public consultations and key registration dates.
- Introduce a Facebook page for the Trustee's advocacy initiative being developed around Champions of the VSB. We propose branding the campaign as "Be a Fan of Vancouver public schools" so that it's in keeping with the vernacular of Facebook. The intent of the campaign is to highlight past grads and why they support public education, while calling on users to join the conversation and become of fan of Vancouver public schools. To be successful, it's recommended that trustees join the conversation using their personal Facebook accounts.
- Links to the social media vehicles deployed will be prominently placed on the district's website.

Phase 2: January-June 2010

- Introduce a VSB YouTube channel as a pilot managed by the Communications Department. A VSB YouTube account has already been established for the

purpose of hosting a 10-minute video promoting the district's international education program.

- A link to the VSB's YouTube channel will be added to the list of other social media vehicles linked on the district's website.

OUTSTANDING ISSUES AND RISKS

The deployment of social media tools is a tremendous opportunity for the school district to improve its public outreach and engagement. By its very nature, Facebook is designed to engage people in conversations and a sharing of ideas. Similarly, the ability to retweet in Twitter allows ideas and messages to reach new audiences quickly.

But this does not come without risks, both in terms of comments users might make against the organization or other users, and ensuring adequate staff resources to manage to tools so they meet the district's expectations.

To that end, one of the next steps Communications will embark on is the development of terms of service statement outlining what will not be tolerated in conversations about the brand.

Communications has modified a similar statement posted by Stanford University to illustrate what might be posted on the district's Facebook page.

Vancouver School Board welcomes the community's contributions to its Facebook page (e.g. comments, photo tagging, wall posts, etc.). Community-contributed content on the page is the opinion of the specific author and does not represent the VSB.

VSB abides by [Facebook's Statement of Rights and Responsibilities](#), and the school district asks its Facebook Fans to do the same. In particular, please do not "post unauthorized commercial solicitations (such as spam)"; "bully, intimidate, or harass any user"; "post content that is hateful, threatening, pornographic, or that contains nudity or graphic or gratuitous violence"; or "do anything unlawful, misleading, malicious, or discriminatory" on the school board's Facebook Page.

VSB reserves the right, but is not obligated, to remove comments that contain commercial solicitations; are factually erroneous/libelous; are wildly off-topic; that cannot be translated into English by Google Translate or other free online translation software; or that otherwise violate [Facebook's Statement of Rights and Responsibilities](#). Facebook encourages all users to utilize the "Report" links when they find abusive content.

VSB thanks you in advance for your contributions to the school district's Facebook Page, and for your help in creating a safe and vibrant online community here.

Communications must also draft a community management plan detailing how the department intends to redistribute resources to manage the social media tools.

Communications will also seek input from various departments about how public comments posted to Facebook concerning issues such as school closure or budget process will be managed to ensure they are properly recorded and distributed.

CONCLUSION

The deployment of social media tools represents an opportunity to expand the communications vehicles the Vancouver school district uses to reach its audiences.

Done right, it provides the district with an avenue to reach the growing number of people creating personalized news feeds. However, we must be careful to manage the risks associated with the project, both in terms of negative comments and unmet organizational expectations resulting from insufficient resources relative to unstated or evolving objectives.