



Engaging Alumni on Social Media: What Works

7 Key Findings

By
Tim Ponisciak

Social media tools provide more opportunities to engage alumni. Yet, pressed for time, alumni relations and annual giving professionals often approach their efforts to engage alumni on social media with some basic uncertainties:

- How often should I post?
- What topics should I post about?
- Should our social media feed be celebratory, nostalgic, or primarily about asking for gifts?
- What kinds of posts are most likely to bring a positive response from engaged alumni?

In December 2015, Academic Impressions and [Tim Ponisciak](#) partnered in a survey of 109 professionals at nonprofit colleges and universities who are tasked with engaging alumni on social media. In this paper, we want to share with you some of our key findings. We will also be hosting a webcast this spring to examine the data more fully, and to review examples and case studies, in order to help you navigate how best to apply these findings at your own institutions. In our survey, we asked respondents about:

- The degree to which their use of social media is coordinated and strategic
- What posts on their social media platforms have been especially successful in engaging alumni

We collected examples of high-engagement posts and analyzed them for commonalities in topic, tone, and approach. We wanted to know what types of posts appeal the most to higher ed alumni, in order to share with you what has been working best for your peers.

The following are the top seven findings from this research. For an in-depth look at the survey findings, Make sure to sign up for the Academic Impressions webcast [Strategizing for Social Media in Advancement](#).

URL: <http://www.academicimpressions.com/webcast/strategizing-social-media-advancement>

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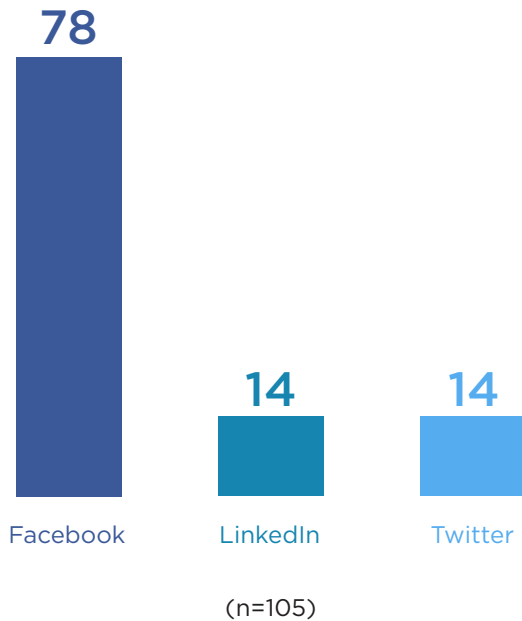
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Findings:

1. It's time to start investing budget dollars, not just time, in social media

Many institutions are investing in social media's paid options. Of those who responded to this question, 79 out of 105 work for departments that have advertised using one of the top three social media sites (Facebook, LinkedIn, or Twitter); 78 out of 105 have invested in Facebook advertising; 14 out of 105 have advertised on LinkedIn; and 14 out of 105 have advertised on Twitter. 48 out of 79 respondents whose departments have invested in social media advertising said that advertising was a worthwhile investment.

Number of Respondents Advertising on Social Media



For those institutions that indicated that investing in social media advertising was worthwhile, here are some of the top goals these institutions listed that they were trying to achieve:

- To increase reach of posts - "Gain more reach (more impressions) on posts about the success of our students; we also advertised in areas for prospective students and unsure about the success of that."
- To promote attendance at events - "Awareness and attendance at events."
- To drive online donations - "Acquire donors for an annual giving challenge, gain more video views and shares."

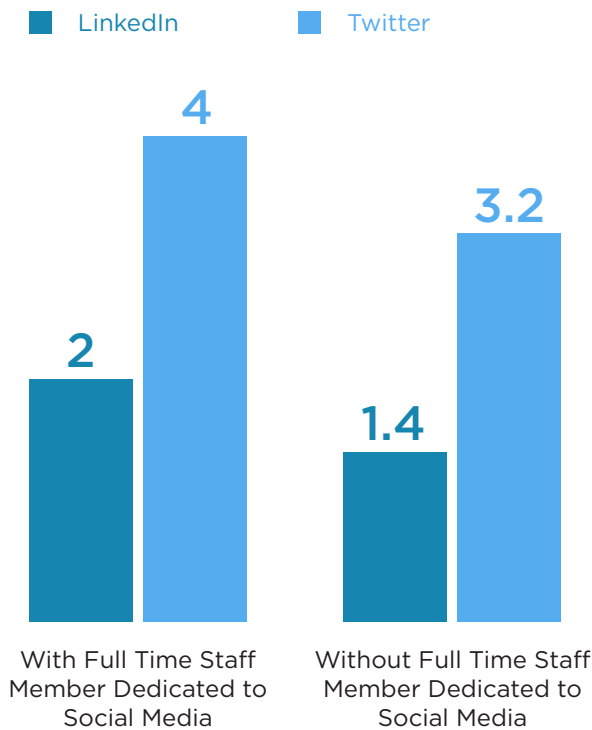
Investing in Social Media Staff

The number of social media staff varies greatly by school size. For respondents from advancement shops with more than 50,000 alumni, 44% (22 out of 50) work in departments that have at least one person devoted solely to social media. Of those with fewer than 50,000 alumni, only 10% (6 out of 59) work for a department with an individual solely devoted to social media. When isolating for just alumni relations departments, this information is similar: for alumni relations departments that have fewer than 50,000 alumni, 14% (3 out of 22) have a full-time staff member devoted to social media. For alumni relations teams with more than 50,000 alumni, 30% (6 out of 20 departments) have one or more full-time staff member(s) devoted to social media. Interestingly, development shops were just as likely to have a full-time social media staff member as alumni relations teams: 21% (9 out of 42) in alumni relations, compared to 21% (5 out of 24) in development, with combined development/alumni relations shops slightly more likely at 29% (5 out of 17).

- Departments that were not alumni relations, development or a combination of the two have 12 out of 31 respondents who indicated that they have one or more full time social media staff members. It should be noted that many of these respondents worked for marketing communications at their schools where it is natural to have a social media professional.

- Why have a full-time social media staff person? If a department has its own full-time social media staff member, this results in higher frequency of posting to LinkedIn (an average of 2 posts per day vs. 1.4 posts per day) and Twitter (average of 4 posts per day vs. 3.2 posts per day). The frequency of posting on Facebook is basically the same for departments with a full-time social media staff person compared to those without one.

Posts Per Day

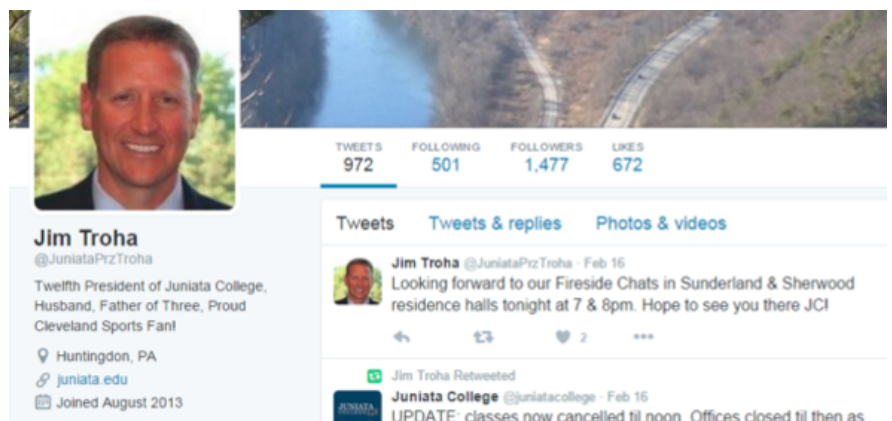


Has your school advertised on social media? Here are some practical tips from the survey:

- **Have a clearly defined goal.** For example: “Gain more reach on posts about the success of our students; we also advertised in areas for prospective students.”
- **Understand your market size.** Smaller schools shared more difficulties in their responses when using Facebook ads. One reason could be that with a smaller alumni and fan base, it is more difficult for Facebook to target those individuals, as compared to a large school with many potential followers.

2. The president’s presence on social media makes a difference

The most passionate alumni from a school are interested in knowing everything about their alma mater. They don’t just want to follow the official Twitter feed; they want to hear from the athletics department, student government, and even the institution president. Almost 40% of those who responded in our survey said that their president has an active, public presence on social media (42 out of 108 respondents who answered this question).

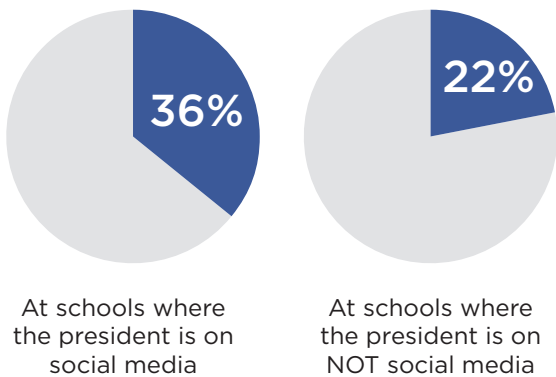


Twitter feed for Jim Troha, President of Juniata College

Moving forward, more and more institutional leaders will have a public persona, especially on Twitter. This provides the president/CEO with an opportunity to be more informal, to allow alumni to become more acquainted with him/her, and for the president to reach more alumni than just higher level donors.

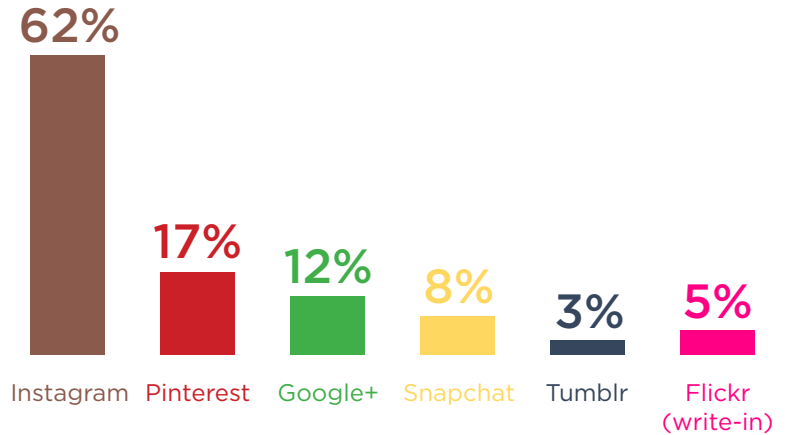
One goal of the survey was to test the following hypothesis: Having a leader who utilizes social media in a public way results in more buy-in for advertising on social media, or having a budget for a full-time staff member. Data from the survey offers some support of this hypothesis as schools that have their leader utilizing social media on behalf of the institution were more likely to advertise on social media (79% to 68%). Also of note, departments at a school that had a president actively using social media were more likely to have a full-time staff member devoted to social media.

Percent of Respondents with One or More Full-Time Social Media Staff Members in their Department

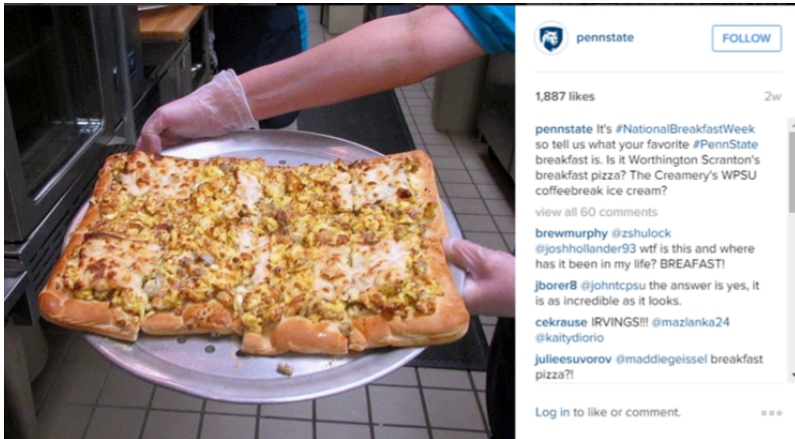


3. Instagram: The Next Investment

Percentage of Higher Education Institutions Using Additional Social Media Sites



Instagram is definitely the favorite that respondents are using to reach their constituents, outside of the big three of Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter. Most college campuses have famous locations, places of beauty, and iconic buildings that alumni want to feel connected to back on campus. Pictures tell a very compelling story, and with the use of smartphone cameras, more and more alumni are using Instagram to capture their own lives, and as a result, they will want you to share current experiences at their alma mater in the same way. Schools that are leveraging Instagram's functionality the best are those that are not just taking broad shots of campus, but are also finding beauty and intrigue in up close shots - of textbooks, pathways, classrooms, and students.



Penn State's Instagram page

The Staying Power of Facebook

Facebook, while many have been predicting it would decline in popularity, is still viewed as the most important social media site for higher education institutions, followed by Twitter.

Twitter is the second most important social media site, as ranked by respondents, followed by LinkedIn, Instagram, and Pinterest.

Rank	Average Ranking	Site
1	1.26	Facebook
2	2.44	Twitter
3	2.91	LinkedIn
4	3.26	Instagram
5	4.82	Pinterest

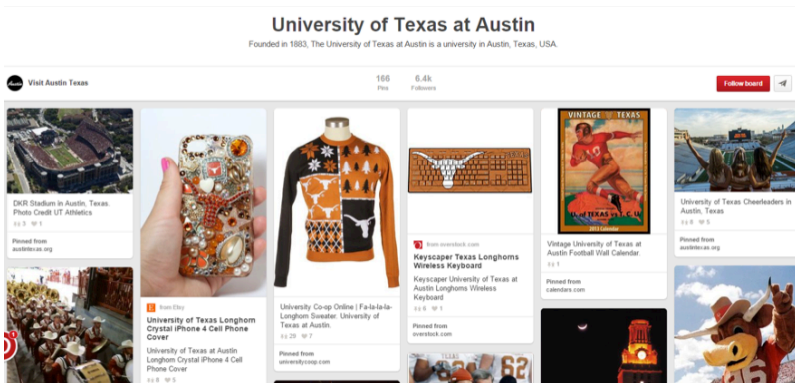
Pinterest is another site that had a significant number of responses, with 17 respondents indicating that it was used in some way. Pinterest, while also being a social media site that focuses on imagery, has an additional avenue of engagement in that its posts are typically meant to educate or enlighten the viewer in some way.

Best practices for Pinterest include:

- Showcasing fan passion
- Showcasing DIY projects involving your school's logo, alma mater, and taglines
- Highlighting antiques or vintage objects involving your school
- Advertising the popularity of weddings on campus

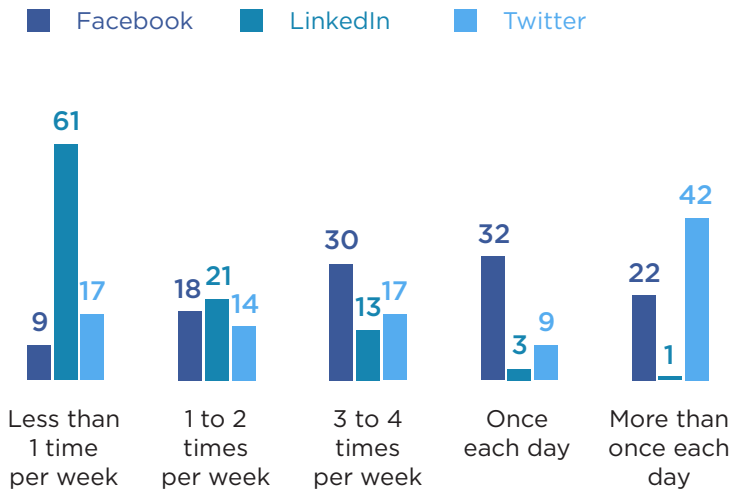
4. Post More Often on Facebook and Twitter

One of the challenges many departments face is figuring out just how often to post on social media, and answering the question "How much is too much for our alumni?" Looking at the data from the survey, Twitter has the highest number of respondents whose departments post more than once a day, with 42 out of 99 respondents. Facebook sees a smaller number of respondents posting more than once a day, at 22 out of 111, but the majority of departments are posting at least 3 to 4 times per week on Facebook.



University of Texas' Pinterest Page

Social Media Posting Frequency by Site



(By number of respondents)

Comparing Higher Education Institutions to Top Corporate Brands

Social media company [SumAll recently conducted research](#) of top brands on social media and found that brands saw optimal engagement with their followers by posting:

- 2 times per day on Facebook
- 3 times per day on Twitter

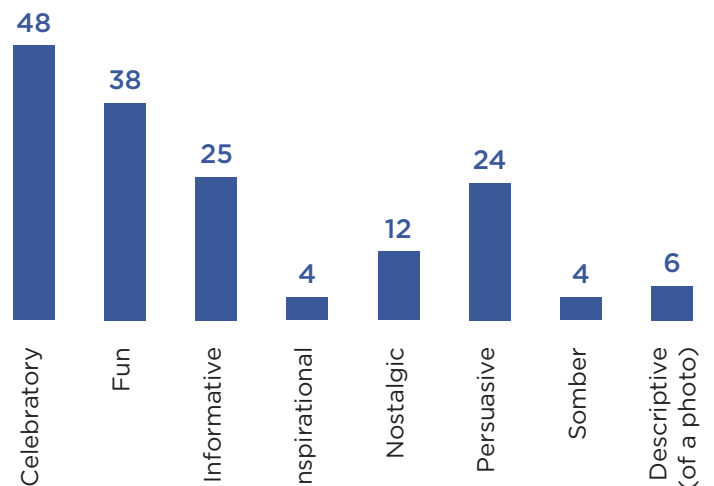
Survey respondents are on par with which sites should have the highest frequency, as Twitter is first, followed by Facebook (LinkedIn is not included in the SumAll research). However, the SumAll research indicates that higher ed institutions could be posting more frequently to both Facebook and Twitter, and still have a very engaged constituent base. Of course, this can be challenging as the institution or department needs to have enough content to warrant posting more often. There is also the concern that alumni may grow tired of their tweets or posts. It follows, though, that alumni feel strong connections to their alma maters, so if corporate brands see optimal engagement at higher levels of posting, then higher ed institutions should also see the same, since most individuals maintain a deeper connection with their alma mater than with their favorite brands.

5. Celebrate, have fun, and inspire your alumni (and make them miss you too)

In addition to knowing the most used social media platforms, and how often peers are posting on social media, it's important also to consider what types of posts are most commonly published and what motivates alumni to engage with a post. In order to do this, posts can be categorized by both the tone used and the topic discussed.

Respondents were asked to submit their three most popular Facebook posts from the last three months and each post submitted by respondents was then categorized by tone and topic. "Most popular" was defined as the three posts on a page that received the most Facebook likes in the past three months. Ultimately, posts broke down into eight different tones: Celebratory, Fun, Informative, Inspirational, Nostalgic, Persuasive, Somber, and Descriptive. There were 170 posts submitted as part of the survey, and the frequency of each tone is listed below. (Nine posts are excluded from the chart below; these nine didn't have a distinct tone. For example, one was a Facebook cover photo update). Naturally, this process has a subjective element in analysis, as what one person categorizes as a fun post, another person may categorize as nostalgic, but the data is still very revealing.

Number of Facebook Posts by Tone



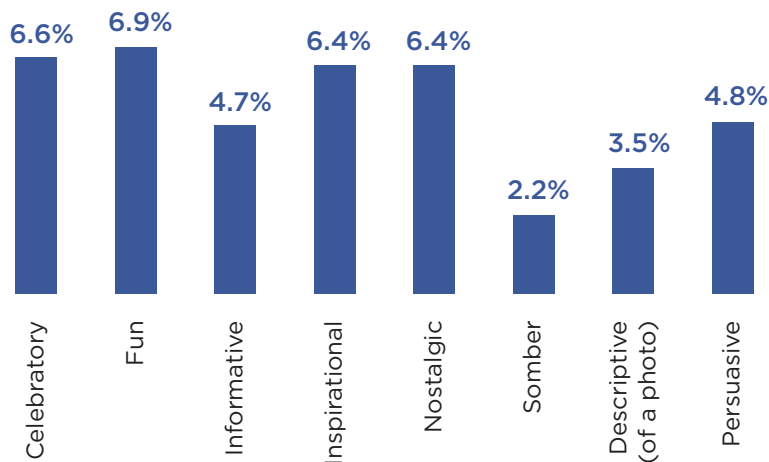
The most popular tones used were:

- Celebratory – It is natural to want to share news that makes one proud to be a part of an institution.
- Fun – Many pages post fun facts, trivia and alumni photos.
- Informative – It is usually necessary to promote different articles to build the brand of an institution
- Persuasive – Most advancement shops and alumni associations are tasked with hosting numerous events and these posts are reminders to individuals to sign up to attend. Also, there are a number of posts focused on encouraging individuals to make a gift to their alma mater.

The Most Engaging Tones to use on Facebook

The posts were also broken out by the tones that had the highest percentage of page followers liking the posts. What types of tones receive the most likes?

Percentage of Facebook Page Followers Liking Posts – Broken out by Tones



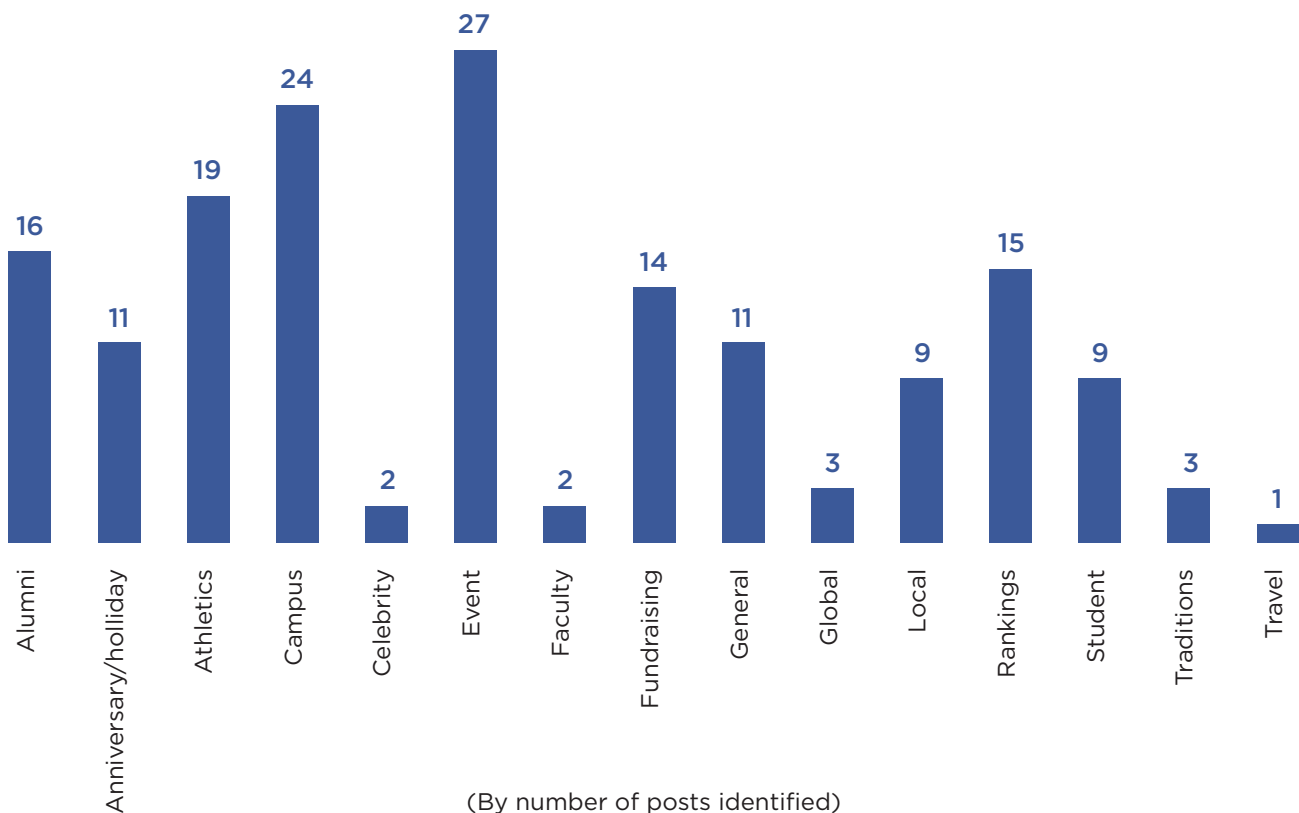
Analysis

Individuals feel compelled to be happy when others succeed. [BuzzSumo conducted research](#) related to what types of articles are most likely to be shared online. Of the top 10,000 most shared articles, the emotion that appeared most often was “Awe,” followed by “Laughter” and “Amusement.” When looking at the top tones used in this study, they align quite well with BuzzSumo’s research: as “Fun,” “Celebratory,” and “Inspirational” fall in the top four tones that were most often “liked”, and those tones are closely aligned with “Awe”, “Laughter” and “Amusement”. The one tone that does not fit as well within the confines of the BuzzSomo research is nostalgic posts, but nostalgia is a powerful emotion as it relates to higher education and alumni’s feelings towards their alma mater.

6. Constituents want to hear about alumni, athletic successes, and local flavor

Similar to the tones that were determined, each post that was submitted could be defined by the topic it discussed. One goal of this study was to determine the topics most frequently posted on Facebook by institutions, as well as which topics were most popular with higher ed constituents. Fifteen distinct topics emerged from the responses, and are shown in the graph below.

Most Popular Topics for Facebook Posts

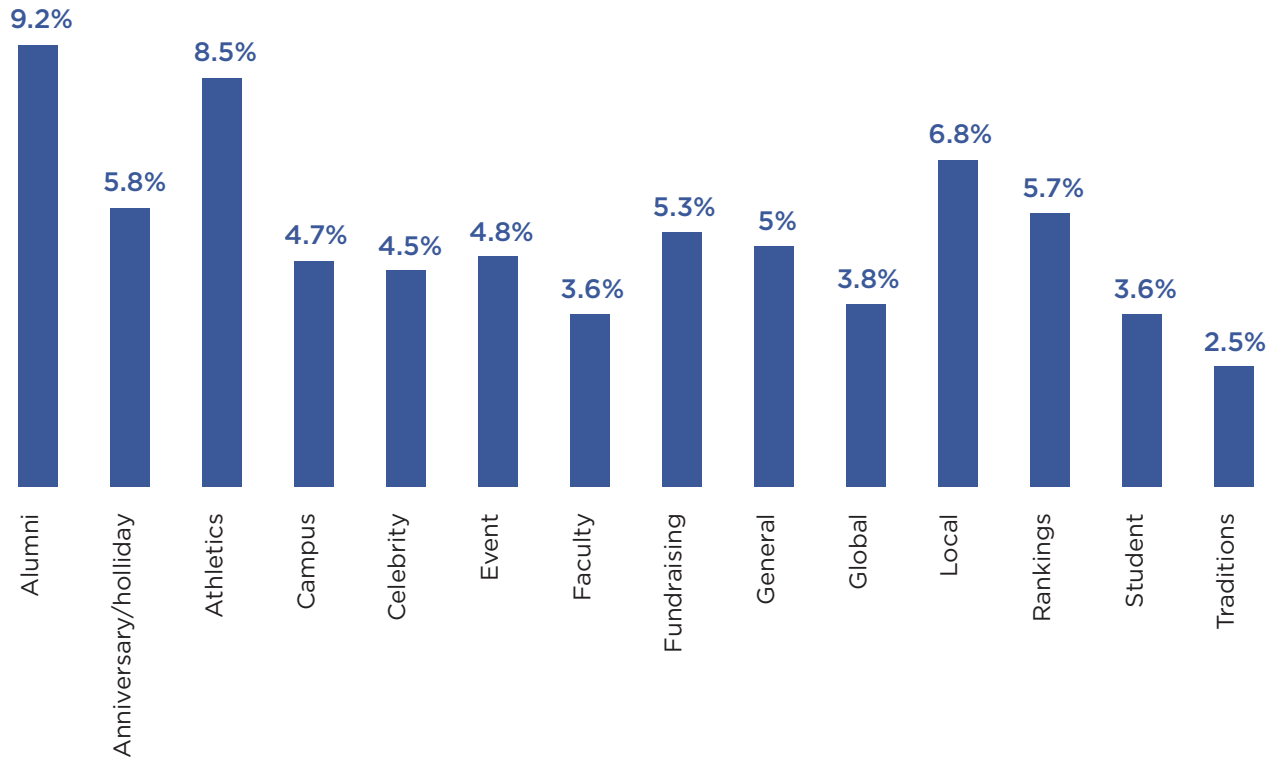


The top five topics shared on Facebook were focused on:

- Events – Posts in which departments encouraged their followership to attend an event, or shared photos from a past event, are the most prevalent topic for posting
- Campus – Photos, typically focused on beautiful or iconic scenes from a campus, are numerous.
- Athletics – Many advancement, marketing communications, and alumni relations departments wish to cultivate a sense of pride in their constituent groups, so whenever a sports team is performing well, this is a popular Facebook post topic.

- Alumni – Many schools post interesting facts or profiles of alumni who have gone on to do great things.
- Rankings – Perhaps second only to athletics in instilling a sense of pride is knowing that your alma mater’s place in the rankings has moved up.

Percentage of Facebook Page Followers Liking a Post – Broken Down by Topic



What topics received the highest percentage of likes by followers?

- Alumni
- Athletics
- Local
- Rankings
- Anniversary/holiday

Posts that were focused on alumni topics were most popular. These posts often show alumni displaying pride in their alma mater, showcase alumni who have won awards, or highlight alumni accomplishing great work in their community.

Alumni like to be proud of their classmates, so it makes sense that this is one of the most popular topics. Not surprisingly, athletics-related posts were the second most popular topic, and rankings-related posts were fourth. Both of these topics are focused around celebrating one's alma mater, which lends itself to alumni displaying their pride by liking the post. One interesting revelation was that posts focused on local topics were also very popular. Local posts can often highlight unique aspects of attending a school in a certain area. There were posts celebrating cold weather, highlighting regional traditions (like visiting Salem around Halloween), and discussing the top things to do in a certain college town. Rounding out the top 5, posts wishing alumni a "Happy Thanksgiving" or celebrating an anniversary for a certain school are also very popular posts for higher ed constituents to "like".

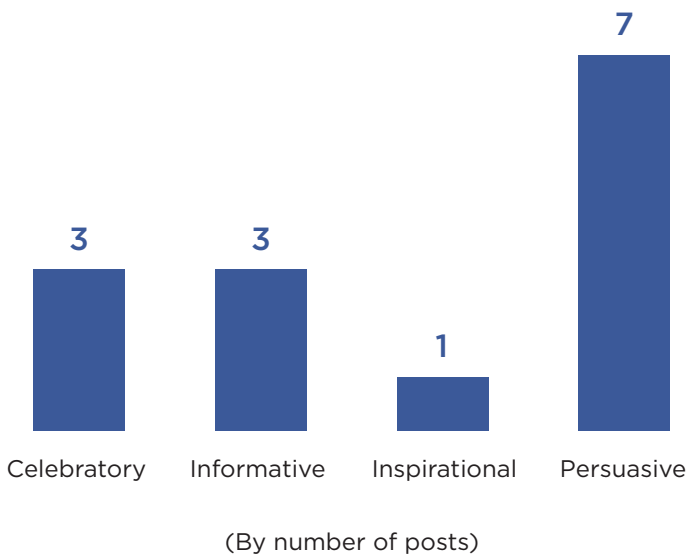
- Celebratory posts - Posts thanking those who donated as part of special campaigns, such as #GivingTuesday.
- Informative posts - Posts announcing major gifts that were recently made to the institution
- Inspirational posts - A post announcing a capital campaign and what makes the school unique
- Persuasive posts - The most popular tone for a Fundraising post, there were 7 posts compelling alumni to make a gift, either as part of Giving Tuesday, a challenge against another school, or a recent graduate challenge

7. Don't Shy Away from Posting about Fundraising

In higher education, there is often reluctance to post on Facebook about philanthropy to the school. Countering that sentiment, we saw a number of fundraising related posts that fell within respondents' top three posts. There were fourteen top Facebook posts that were specifically focused on giving.

Tones used for fundraising posts varied quite a bit:

Types of Tones used in Fundraising Posts

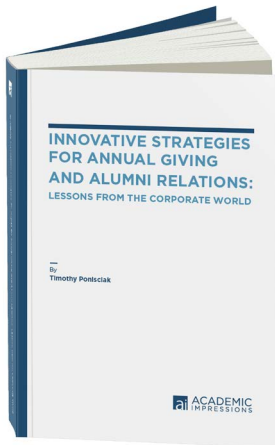


Strategizing for Social Media in Advancement

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For an in-depth look at the survey findings, Make sure to sign up for the Academic Impressions webcast [Strategizing for Social Media in Advancement](http://www.academicimpressions.com/webcast/strategizing-social-media-advancement).

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Innovative Strategies for Annual Giving and Alumni Relations: Lessons from the Corporate World

A book by Tim Ponisciak

Entice alumni to do more to help spread your institution's brand. Look to *Innovative Strategies for Annual Giving and Alumni Relations: Lessons from the Corporate World* to explore:

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- New and proven marketing techniques that can greatly benefit your department
- Institutional examples of applying marketing techniques with greater impact.
- Key questions to ask yourself and your school before moving forward
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See how these ideas can be applied to every institution and are accessible to any school regardless of size and background.

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Tim Ponisciak

Tim led young alumni and student fundraising initiatives at the University of Notre Dame for three years, with a focus on educating young alumni on the importance of giving and increasing the young alumni giving participation rate. He directed the university's five- and ten-year reunion giving programs, launched the William Corby Society—ND's giving society for young alumni—and he oversaw the efforts of various alumni volunteer groups. He worked with students on the senior class gift program, as well as on other undergraduate fundraising campaigns.

Tim currently serves as the director of graduate alumni relations for Notre Dame's Mendoza College of Business. Tim keeps the college's graduate alumni connected to the university through online communications, campus, and regional events, and volunteer activities with the college's various degree programs.

To read more of Tim's work, check out *Innovative Strategies for Annual Giving and Alumni Relations: Lessons from the Corporate World*, published by Academic Impressions, and check out his blog <http://alumnicalyst.weebly.com>.

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