

Foreword

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I was a 30-something chief education officer in America in the late 1970s when I purchased a set of Commodore PET 8k computers for my schools in Deer Park, New York. You couldn't do much with them except program them to perform simple functions and games (Space Invaders was a favourite); word processing was not even a reality back then. Needless to say, the world has changed dramatically since I bought those computers; today, toys in cereal boxes come with more computing power than the Commodore PET, and computers have transitioned from our desktops to the palms of our hands to revolutionise how we communicate and when.

Skill in communication is a key ingredient for school leaders' success in today's complex education environment, and this communication now includes social media. Social media tools are incredibly powerful, and many educators are grappling with the reality that social media has become the standard for communication for a new generation of students and parents. Kids do not talk anymore – they text. People maintain relationships solely via Facebook. Information about our schools travels through the Internet at incredible speed, promulgated by students, parents, staff and members of the community. Educators can either learn to use these powerful tools or stand hopelessly by as the information – good and bad – swirls around them. Ultimately, whether we choose to use the medium or not, we must be familiar with it and aware of what it can do – both *for* us and *to* us.

Regardless of your level of technological literacy, this book will help you understand and navigate the intricate world of today's social media and the challenges and opportunities it poses for our schools.

I met Kitty Porterfield and Meg Carnes when I became chief education officer of schools in Fairfax County, Virginia, in 1997. Since then, they have been invaluable resources in helping me communicate with all segments of my school community and beyond. Together, Kitty, Meg and I have managed through the changes brought on by technological advances. This book focuses on the latest communication challenge educators and our schools face – school communications in the digital age.

Kitty and Meg explore and explain the many facets of social media and the issues surrounding it to help you make the best decisions for your situation. 'To tweet or not to tweet, that is the question.' Indeed, school leaders wonder, Should we have a Facebook page or blog, or both? How interactive should our webpage be? The authors guide you through lessons about social media sites and tools and how to use them most effectively. I have greatly benefitted from their expertise, and with this book, you can too.

Given the speed of change in technology, this up-to-date book is a must for all school leaders who want to learn about today's social media and how to most effectively use it to communicate with their stakeholders.

Table of Contents

About the Authors	v
Foreword	ix
Introduction	1
Three Goals	2
Hold Tight or Let Go?	3
CHAPTER 1	
The Change	5
A Connected World	8
Getting and Using News	8
Who Uses New Tools?	11
Next Steps	13
Who Are Our Stakeholders?	13
New Tools for the New Generations	16
The New Challenge	18
Next Steps	19
Ten Realities of Social Media	19
Next Steps	22
Key Points	23
CHAPTER 2	
A Hyperconnected Community	25
Where Are Our Stakeholders?	25
Facebook	25

Twitter	26
Blogs	26
Message Boards.....	27
Micro-News Networks.....	28
Who Else Is There?.....	29
Next Steps	30
Key Points	30

CHAPTER 3

Leading the Change.....	31
Wide Networks, Great Conversations.....	32
Linking School and Community	33
Choking on Facts	34
Soft Selling in a Hard Market	37
Five Ways to Reconnect With Stakeholders in the 21st Century.....	38
Next Steps	39
Creating Change in the Trenches	39
Strategies With Solid Results.....	41
Next Steps	44
Key Points	44

CHAPTER 4

Planning Your Debut and Creating an Online Platform.....	45
Checking Your Culture	46
Collaborative Effort	48
Remembering Your Goals	48
Next Steps	49
Your Online Platform.....	49
Your Website.....	49
Tracking Your Users and Getting Feedback.....	50
Outposts.....	52
Next Steps	54
Key Points	54

CHAPTER 5

Facebook 101	55
Profiles Versus Pages	55
Terms to Know	56
Wall	56
News Feed	57
Like	57
Comment	57
Next Steps	58
Taking Charge of Your Facebook Community	58
Managing Privacy Settings	58
Monitoring Comments	60
Maintaining Strong, Active Leadership	61
Next Steps	63
Key Points	63

CHAPTER 6

Twitter 101	65
The Benefits of Brevity and Speed	66
Twitter Shorthand	66
What's in It for Me?	67
Tweets or Emails?	68
Intersecting With a Wide Audience	68
Shaping Your Story in Other Media	69
Bad Tweets and Better Tweets	69
Ten Twitter Dos and Don'ts	71
Educators Who Tweet	72
Next Steps	73
Key Points	74

CHAPTER 7

Blogging 101	75
Connecting the Community to the School	75
Revealing the Human Side	76

Providing 'Thought Leadership'	78
Next Steps	79
Key Points	79

CHAPTER 8

Crafting Social Media Guidelines	81
What Are We Afraid Of?	82
Balancing Risks Versus Benefits	83
An Ounce of Prevention	83
Next Steps	85
Where to Start	85
Guidelines for Your Community	87
Guidelines for Critical Moments	89
Next Steps	89
Key Points	89

CHAPTER 9

What We Say and How We Say It Matter	91
Roadblocks	91
Making Things Sticky	92
Getting Straight to the Point	95
Next Steps	95
The Language of Social Media	96
Write Short	96
Write Like You Speak	97
Write to Connect	98
Write With Passion	99
Focus on the Verbs	99
Write to Figure Out What You Are Thinking	99
Edit - A Lot	100
Create a Structure	100
Point to Additional Sources	100
Triage for Your Readers	100
Next Steps	101
Key Points	101

CHAPTER 10

Listening to Social Media	103
Sharpening Your Listening Skills.....	104
Develop Goals: What Are You Trying to Accomplish?.....	104
Specify Time: How Often Will You Listen?	104
Designate Personnel: Who Will Listen?	105
Develop a Collection Tool: How Will You Record Your Observations?	105
Decide What to Do Next: How Will You Use What You've Heard?	106
Next Steps	106
Search Engines Make Listening Easy.....	107
Creating a Listening Post.....	108
Identifying Keywords.....	109
Next Steps	110
Key Points	110

CHAPTER 11

Crisis Management and Social Media	113
Timing Is Everything	114
Building and Maintaining Trust	115
Act Fast, and Act Early	116
A Dance of Opposites	117
Making Meaning in a Crisis	118
Evaluating Results Over Time.....	119
Next Steps	120
Key Points	120

CHAPTER 12

The New World: It's Just the Beginning.....	121
It's Not About the Toys.....	122
There Are No Right Answers	122

Social Media Is an Attitude	123
Next Steps	123
Key Points	124
References and Resources.....	125
Index	135

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Introduction

In his review of *The Twitter Book* (2009), by Tim O'Reilly and Sarah Milstein, Steve Rubel (2011), director of insights at Edelman Digital, likens a journey into social media to a journey into Nepal:

Ever been to Nepal? Me neither. However if I ever do go ... I will enlist a Sherpa to guide me through the landscape and the nuances of the culture.

We have written *Why Social Media Matters: School Communication in the Digital Age* to be your Sherpa on your journey into the new world of social media – a journey that can be exciting, interesting, baffling, challenging and ultimately rewarding.

School leaders have often been slow to venture into the realm of new media, perhaps fearing that social media and other tools will turn out to be passing fads or, at best, just a way to play or find old friends. We know too many school leaders who continue to ignore tools like Facebook, YouTube and Twitter. They tell us, 'We don't understand what these things are and what they are supposed to do for us.' For these leaders, investing in new media might seem like a waste of time and money. However, nothing could be further from the truth.

Times have changed. In today's world, it is no longer enough to do a good job teaching the young people in our schools. Educators must also take care to build and sustain trusting relationships with students' families and with the taxpayers in the communities they serve. School leaders have a responsibility to reach out to the larger

community – to listen to their stakeholders and include them in the life of the school in new ways, to provide information more quickly than ever before, and ultimately, to build stakeholder trust. To do this, leaders must develop new communication skills that utilise new technologies.

Educators used to communicate by sending messages *out* to parents and the community. We now live in an age in which information is shared – not just distributed – and two-way communication is expected. Just as rows of desks nailed to the floor are remnants of education in a nineteenth-century agrarian society, the six-panel, four-colour, two-fold brochure and monthly paper newsletters are the remnants of a twentieth-century view of adequate school communication. We contend that social media tools – although admittedly imperfect – are necessary to meet the demands of school communities today.

Three Goals

In this book, we have tried to accomplish three goals:

1. We explore the communication landscape in which we all are operating. How did we get here? Why has social media become so important? Who is part of our network? Why is it critical that schools get with the program? What happens if they don't? It is our belief that to use social media well, you have to understand something about *why* it is so powerful and how you can get the most out of it.
2. We explore the process of how to plan your social media debut and how to create an online platform. We lay out step-by-step instructions on the basic mechanics of three popular tools of social media: Twitter, Facebook and blogs. We describe how to send a Tweet, create a Facebook page for your school or region, and develop a blog. These chapters are meant to help a novice get his or her feet wet, so to speak. They also offer examples of how these platforms can work to support teaching and learning in your schools or region.