

Social Media Handbook

UNIVERSITY OF
Southampton

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The purpose of this document is to establish a University-wide standard for the management of branded social media channels.

It will provide guidance to University staff on using social media in a professional capacity i.e. when speaking on *behalf* of the University.

All elements of the guide are founded on 10 basic principles that meet all the normal expectations for a branded channel, in a way that also enables the flexibility and room for creativity that you will need to succeed on social media. The aim is to represent the University at its best, while also giving you the knowledge to establish an online identity and trusting audience, both of which will help you achieve your goals.

Here they are:

- **User needs first**
A good social media channel is only ever as strong as its audience. Figure out what your target audience wants and give it to them in the format they want it.
- **Always add value**
The average social media user browses their preferred platform to find something that interests them, which means you will always be competing with everything else they have subscribed to. No matter what you post, it is important to always consider how it will add value to your audience's day.
- **Be authentic**
"Social" media – the clue is in the name. In order to be heard, your language, tone and character must be personable and engaging. Offline, we all present ourselves in a certain way to capture a listener's attention and start a conversation – the exact same principle applies on social media.
- **Start a conversation and keep it going**
Unlike traditional top-down media formats (e.g. printed materials/TV advertising/websites), social media allows for a two-way conversation between you and your audience. Users will be able to comment on things you say and send you messages, and in the vast majority of cases, will expect you to respond in kind.
- **Be respectful**
Access to a global network of users offers a wealth of different cultural and social perspectives and opinions in your community. It is important to acknowledge how your entire audience, not just those you're familiar with, might perceive your content.

- **One size doesn't fit all**
When running several channels on different platforms, your strategy should adapt accordingly. It isn't enough to create one message and copy it verbatim across each channel – tailor it for each platform in turn.
- **Good data leads to good decisions**
Short of conducting regular surveys with your entire audience, which would be impractical, you will rely on the analytics provided by each platform to determine how well your content is performing with your audience(s). It is vital that you align the metrics you choose to measure with the goals you are hoping to achieve using your social media channel.
If your goal is lead generation, then clickthrough to your webpage is a good data point to track, whereas community-building might be better measured in terms of how many discussions on your channel you observed over a month. Data that look good, but are not linked in any meaningful way to a goal, are often referred to as “vanity metrics”.
- **Use it or lose it**
A channel that is only updated sporadically, uses irrelevant content to fill the spaces between valuable updates, or sits unused for a long period, is a channel that did not need to exist in the first place. In order to grow an engaged audience, updates must go out on a regular basis. If you do not have a sizeable pool of content or resources to sustain this kind of activity, the channel is effectively redundant.
- **Always have a failsafe**
No branded social media channel should have a single point of failure. In the event of a critical mistake or crisis, the potential for reputation damage is massive if the problem isn't rectified quickly. All channels should have at least two administrators and you must arrange cover in case of absence.
- **Personal data is sacred**
In a sense, this could equally come under ‘Be respectful’, but recent changes to data protection regulations call for a specific focus on how we handle and use people's personal data. It is vital that any data relating to a person (this includes everything from their name, to a photo in which they are easily identified) is treated with the utmost care, and that you receive their express consent to use it as part of your activities.
We strongly suggest you familiarise yourself with the requirements and implications around GDPR via the relevant Sharepoint site: <http://go.soton.ac.uk/9pe>

Please be aware that all activities carried out on the University network/channels, social media or otherwise, must adhere to the Electronic Communications policy provided by iSolutions.

You can find a copy of the policy here: <http://go.soton.ac.uk/9oa>

Contents

- Identify your goals 4
- Choose a platform 5
- Speak with one voice 7
- Facebook 9
- Twitter 10
- Instagram 11
- LinkedIn 13
- YouTube 14
- Contact 15

Identify your goals

Be clear on why you're using social media. It is a particularly valuable tool (generally in conjunction with others) for the following:

- **Lead generation**

"The initiation of consumer interest or enquiry into products or services of a business." Put simply: getting people interested in something that you want to offer them.

Example: promoting an upcoming University Open Day to prospective students

- **Community building**

Bringing people together to discuss ideas, support a campaign you are running, or just stay in touch with each other.

Example: providing a private online space for participants in a clinical trial to 'meet' and discuss their experiences

- **Customer care**

Managing queries, comments and feedback (both positive and negative) from people who are involved with whatever it is that you offer.

- **Crisis communications**

Communicating vital updates quickly with a large number of people, in the event of an emergency situation.

Choose a platform

Different social media platforms are better suited for different goals, so it makes sense to choose one which is best for what you're hoping to achieve.

Remember: user needs first – think about who you are trying to reach and why.

- **Facebook**

Good for: lead generation, community building, and customer care
Not ideal for: crisis communications

Facebook's main news feed is algorithm-driven, which means only a limited portion of your audience will actually see any given post, increasing with how well the post performs.

Factors that affect your "reach" include:

- the type of content (e.g. text/photo/link/video)
- the time it was posted
- how many of the people who have already seen it also engaged with it (e.g. likes/shares)
- comments and more importantly *discussions* are now the most important factor, alongside users sharing your posts to their personal profiles

- **Twitter**

Good for: crisis communications, community building and customer care
Not ideal for: lead generation

While there is a small element of algorithm influence on Twitter's news feed, it is still generally chronological, which means the number of people who see your post is determined by the time it goes live and how many users 'retweet' it.

Factors that affect your reach include:

- how many followers you have (and the times of day they typically use Twitter)
- how 'shareable' your post is (i.e. how many times the post is retweeted)
- which hashtag(s) you include to align your post with a particular theme or campaign

- **Instagram**

Good for: community building and (in very specific cases) lead generation, particularly with younger people
Not ideal for: crisis communications and customer care

Instagram's feed is also algorithm-driven, although as a platform with a very heavy focus on visual over written content, the criteria for good reach are simple:

- high quality, creative and authentic imagery
- married closely with a caption that tells a story or complements the more playful style of Instagram

- **LinkedIn**

Good for: community building, particularly with staff and alumni

Not ideal for: lead generation, customer care and crisis communications

LinkedIn is a social media platform for working professionals to connect with employers and colleagues and people in their professional network.

Factors that affect your reach include:

- the type of content (e.g. text/photo/link/video)
- the time it was posted
- how many of the people who have already seen it also engaged with it (e.g. likes/comments/link clicks)

- **YouTube**

Good for: lead generation, particularly with prospective students

Not ideal for: community building, crisis communications and customer care

YouTube works very differently to other social media platforms. Video is front and centre, and it can be used to embed video content on other platforms and websites.

Factors that affect your reach include:

- how engaging your videos are
- how frequently you post new videos
- where your videos are hosted, away from the main YouTube website

Speak with one voice

Our voice on social media is straightforward, friendly, and above all *human*. We prioritise being helpful over being entertaining, but a healthy mix of both helps to draw more people into our audiences. We are professional yet personable – the vast majority of social media users do not welcome the relatively cold tone of static publications.

You are encouraged to develop a unique voice or character to represent whichever channels you use, bearing in mind these basic criteria, as this personalises your content for the audience you are trying to reach.

A few more guidelines that will help you excel on social media:

- **Be concise**
Use short words and sentences to communicate your message as quickly as possible, avoiding unnecessary adjectives and adverbs. This doesn't mean "be boring", it just means "be brief".
- **Be specific**
Avoid vague language that gets in the way of your message being understood clearly and immediately by your audience.
- **Be human**
Read your post aloud to yourself. Does it sound natural, like something you would say in conversation with your target audience? Would you react positively to hearing it from someone else? If not, why would you expect that of your audience?
- **Avoid slang and jargon**
Write in plain English where possible. Of course, there will be times when specialist language is required – in this case, it helps to explain what it means.
- **Use active verbs**
The active voice is easier to understand than the passive voice. It makes your message sound positive and direct, as it would in conversation, and gives a strong impression that you are taking ownership of what you're saying.

DO: *"We'll send your results in the post."*

DON'T: *"Your results will be sent to you in the post."*
- **Write positively**
Use positive rather than negative language, and avoid double negatives like the plague.

DO: *"To claim your free doughnut, sign up here: [LINK]"*

DON'T: *"You can't get a free doughnut if you don't sign up here: [LINK]"*
- **Address people directly**
Use personal pronouns – we, you, our, your. If it isn't clear who "we" is, then explain!
- **Abbreviations**
Some words are fine to shorten, such as "info" for "information". However, the use of numbers and letters in place of words comes across very poorly, such as "4" instead of "for", or "u" instead of "you". If you are struggling to complete your message without many abbreviations, then it is too complex for a single post anyway. Either simplify it, or find a way to break it up into a series of distinct messages.

- **Use hashtags when relevant**

Hashtags are a very powerful tool for aligning your message with a specific theme, campaign or topic, and we use them rarely and deliberately. Overuse of hashtags is widely frowned upon, as it makes your message more difficult to follow and creates an impression that you don't have faith in the quality of your content. It's also worth bearing in mind that any punctuation or spaces in the middle of a hashtag will break it.

DO: *"We hope you are enjoying our #UoSOpenDay – visit our website for extra resources to enhance your day: [LINK]"*

DO: *"Our researchers at the Centre for #Cancer Immunology are working hard to bring new and innovative treatments to the wider medical community: [LINK] #YoureIt"*

DON'T: *"#Applying for #university can seem a little #daunting and #confusing – we're here to #help! Join #experts in our #recruitment #team #live at 3pm #tomorrow as they take you through the #process, #step by #step: [LINK]"*

DON'T: *"Students – #graduation's just a few weeks away! Don't forget to book your ceremony place and sort out your robes before the deadline: [LINK] #UoS graduation"*

- **Your 'call to action' (usually a link to a website) should be easy to find**

When we include a link, it goes at the end of a post after a colon. For example:

"It's official! We're one of the best 100 universities in the world: [LINK]"

- **Engagement**

Where appropriate, you can tag the subject of your post if they have a channel of their own. However, avoid addressing posts for a general audience directly towards individuals.

DO: *"This week, @GeorgiaLHarper tells us about some of her favourite women in science, with a focus on how they use social media to share their research with the world: [LINK] #LifeAtSouthampton #UoSWomen"*

DON'T: *"Hey @GeorgiaLHarper, can you retweet this post we wrote about you: [LINK]"*

- **Cross-promote your channels**

Let your audience on one channel know that they can find you on their other favourite platforms too! You can do this by adding links to the bio/about/info section of your channel for each platform.

- **Promote your website**

Make sure the bio/about/info section of your channel links to a relevant page on the University's website.

- **Spelling, punctuation and styling**

It should go without saying that poor spelling, grammar, punctuation and formatting are just not acceptable on a University channel. For trickier grammar rules, the Guardian and Observer style guide offers some great advice:

<https://www.theguardian.com/guardian-observer-style-guide-a>

Facebook

Good for:

- Lead generation - post clear calls to action that link directly to a webpage with more information about what your audience should do
- Community building – create a dialogue and maintain public conversations as you would in person
- Customer care – respond helpfully, politely and promptly to queries in public (e.g. the comments section) and private (e.g. the direct message inbox)

Topics

A few examples of good topics for posts:

- The University's latest and most interesting research
- Awards and success stories
- Promotional content around events and courses
- Stories about students' achievements and milestones
- Life at the University, accommodation and campus, and Southampton as a city

Tone

In terms of tone, consider how your target audience uses Facebook, what they're looking to get out of it, and how they prefer to interact, connect and share with others.

For example, prospective students might be excited about starting a new chapter in their lives, and want to share posts that show where their future is heading – find a way to echo this. On the other hand, current students might prefer informative posts with a little less emotion and more direct value, such as rich discussions around topics they find interesting or links to articles written with them in mind.

Style

Facebook is good for a variety of media formats – you can really get creative with imagery, infographics, animations, 360 degree videos and live feeds.

There is practically no word limit on posts. However, you should aim for 1-2 sentences unless you have something valuable to say with the extra space, such as information that isn't hosted on a webpage that you can link to.

Address users directly where possible and when it feels natural – “your”, “you”, “our”.

Front-load your posts with the most relevant information, as users' eyes generally scan down the left side of any webpage, including social media platforms.

For example: *“Our free online course, Shipwrecks and Submerged Worlds, starts next year. Sign up at: [LINK]”*

Rather than: *“Shipwrecks and Submerged Worlds – free online course starting next year: [LINK]”*

Twitter

Good for:

- Crisis communications – quickly post updates in an emerging situation and respond to queries offering clarity
- Community building – create a dialogue and maintain public conversations as you would in person
- Customer care – respond helpfully, politely and promptly to queries in public (i.e. replying to tweets) and private (i.e. the direct message inbox)

Topics

A few examples of good topics for posts:

- Responding to/commenting on current events or media coverage
- Promoting latest research and news, such as rankings, awards or academic success
- Promoting upcoming events with a wide array of different pieces of content
- Updates during events as they happen, such as quotes from a speaker delivering a lecture

Tone

Twitter is more conversational and personal than other social networks. With that in mind, feel free to show off some personality and speak as you would in a normal conversation, as a representative of the University.

The way you speak can be quite informal, for example using ‘&’ instead of ‘and’, etc.

Style

Try to address people directly, using the pronouns “you” and “us”, “your” and “our”.

Be specific rather than rhetorical if you want people to respond.

For example: “First week at uni? What’s the one thing you can’t live without?”
Rather than: “First week at uni! Is everybody ready?”

Twitter is a busy, fast-moving platform, so it’s important that you keep active and engaged with the community. Aim to contribute relevant or useful posts regularly. However, if you don’t have something relevant to say, don’t post things just for the sake of it.

Another way of staying engaged is to monitor the online conversations your community is involved in, and contribute and engage in the discourse when it seems natural for you to do so.

When your audience needs to find support quickly, they’re likely to use Twitter to contact you. Make sure your replies are helpful, timely and polite.

Instagram

Good for:

- Community building – especially if you “regram” (manually re-post) other people’s content with their permission, allowing them to share their own perspective as part of a dialogue with the University.
- Lead generation – note however that it isn’t possible to include a link in the caption for a post, so Instagram is only valuable in this case as a supplement to other promotional activity

Topics

A few examples of good topics for posts:

- The environment and facilities of the University campus, which relate to your particular area (NB filling your channel with “general” campus shots will not serve your audience in any meaningful way)
- The attractions and highlights of Southampton as a destination city
- Encouraging reflection and sharing of individual experiences among your community
- Celebrating the academic milestones of the student community
- Candid human stories – personal touches that show the best aspects of the University’s community

Tone

Instagram’s audience is young and appreciates candour, so make sure your posts are oozing with authenticity and character.

Expectations of image quality are different on Instagram to other social media platforms. While it’s important for them to be high quality, they shouldn’t appear too ‘professional’. Stock photos are generally very flat and uninteresting – Instagram images should instead retain an element of realism so that they are relatable and ‘real’.

Think about the other content that appears on people’s Instagram feeds — this is the environment your posts will be compared against and it’s important to capture the same inspiring and entertaining tone. Consider creating your own personal account first to see what Instagram feeds look and feel like.

Style

Quality over quantity, *always*. We don’t want to clog people’s feeds.

Instagram allows you to post stills, galleries, video and sound – these are used in innovatively and all in moderation by the most popular users, so you will need get creative to compete.

You can create a dialogue by posting user-generated content - photo contests are a good way to engage your audience. If ‘regramming’ (re-posting content from others), be sure to contact the owner to get the high-resolution version, and tag and credit them in your post.

Always accompany your images with captions to subtly promote whatever it is you’re hoping to achieve with your channel. Showcase the university, its environment, its achievements and its people.

There's no character limit, but try to keep captions to 1 sentence or a short phrase. Feel free to throw in an emoji 😊

Bear in mind that you can't include a URL in your post captions, but it is common practice to have one in your 'bio' at the top of your channel, and encourage users to tap it for more information.

Always try to incorporate the hashtag #UniversityOfSouthampton (as well as any others used by the corporate Instagram account, such as #LoveSouthampton, where relevant) and tag the location in each post. Again, keep the number of hashtags within full sentences to a minimum, as **#too #many #hashtags** can **#make** sentences **#difficult** to **#read**.

Actively engage with other users by commenting on and liking their content, or tagging them in posts that relate to them.

DO: How's this for a mug shot? Hit the link in our bio for your chance to win a #UniversityOfSouthampton mug!

DON'T: Students: enter our Instagram #competition to #win a University of Southampton #mug: socsi.in/cynHD #winning #LOL

LinkedIn

Good for:

- Community building – especially among staff and alumni
- Lead generation – if it's to do with employment or research opportunities, or perhaps programmes targeted towards alumni

Topics

A few examples of good topics for posts:

- media mentions - strengthening the university's position as a leader in research and real world applications
- "We're hiring!" posts - advertising career opportunities
- post-graduate opportunities
- promoting collaborations between private industry and the University
- promoting University rankings or academic success
- promoting the University's track record in employability and opportunities for professional development
- highlighting notable alumni and their success stories

Tone

People use LinkedIn to find job opportunities, to network, or to talk about their professional successes or challenges. It's not a platform for entertainment, so your tone should be professional, engaging and authoritative.

Style

Don't clutter people's feeds with posts. The most influential brands on LinkedIn post about 10 times a week as an absolute maximum.

LinkedIn is a great platform to display thought-leadership, and its format is designed to host long form posts. With that in mind, people are more likely to read and engage with your posts if you write them with the principles of web content in mind, (i.e. using active language, putting important details at the start of sentences, keeping sentences short, chunking content up into short paragraphs, and avoiding unnecessary adverbs and adjectives.)

YouTube

Good for:

- Lead generation

Topics

A few examples of good topics for posts:

- Inspiring invitations to events, such as Open Days
- Portraits of the city and what it has to offer
- Inspiring messages for prospective students, e.g. 'A day in the life of a student'
- Practical messages for students, e.g. 'Student finance', 'Accommodation', etc.
- Current student successes or opportunities
- A practical demonstration of a piece of visually-engaging research
- A passionately-delivered vlog (video blog) on your area of expertise
- A summary of key findings from a piece of research and its impact

Tone

Tone is less sensitive on YouTube. Because the focus is primarily on the video itself, your titles, descriptions, tagging and structuring of your posts (e.g. playlists) are all more geared towards accessibility and conversions to pages or events. However, it is helpful to keep a consistent voice across most social media channels, so use your tone on Facebook as a reference point.

If there is more information available that is related to the topic of the video, for example on a corresponding webpage, include a link in the description box.

Style

Use clear, engaging and consistent video titles that are easily findable and that prompt people to watch. For example, we use: VIDEO TITLE | University of Southampton

Always include a description and make sure it's optimised for Search Engines (SEO), by using keywords related to your subject areas and specialisms.

Give playlists a simple, clear, interesting and specific relevant title, e.g. 'Latest research in cancer immunology'.

Refer to our video guidelines on the Brand website for specifics on creating your video.

Contacts:

Central social media team: socialmedia@soton.ac.uk

UoS Social Media Slack community: <http://ow.ly/YaLT30jUm4S>

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