

## I-AAA ADA | CORNER

If you are like me, you don't have time to learn new technology. You don't have the patience to build a Twitter or Facebook page. You don't want to relinquish control of privacy to donors, fans and media.

Like it or not, we need to make the time to learn. We need to have patience to build our accounts. We need to relinquish control in order to control the bigger message. The business has changed and "new" media isn't new anymore. It is social technology and social media, and it is here to stay. Extra, extra, Tweet all about it!

The evolution of social technology has changed how athletics departments communicate with fans and alumni, giving departments the ability to control the message rather than respond to what is said about our student-athletes and coaches. Five years ago, we had traditional media, we had our static department websites, and the fringe group fans moderated message boards and chat rooms with which none of us wanted to deal because the discussions were borderline lunacy.

Fast-forward five years and athletics directors across college athletics must deal with the changes in social technology and how those changes affect our business. At the I-AAA level, we have to adapt to those changes with smaller staffs while realizing that the business model needs to change along with our strategies. We can't keep adding duties onto our staff, especially our athletics communications or marketing staff, without changing.

At Niagara University, we tell our coaches and staff that our website and social technology strategy has two functions: recruit student-athletes and make money. The rest of the functions all feed into those two main functions. You need to make sure your stakeholders (ticket buyers, corporate partners, donors, media partners) want to continue investing in you. You need to make sure prospective student-athletes see your institution as a viable location for college. We cannot lose sight of the fact that athletics is an enrollment tool trying to identify and matriculate the best student-athletes possible for Niagara University.

During the last 18 months, we have spent significant time in re-tooling our external relations side of the department to adapt to social technology and new media.

The first step in the process was to hone our policies regarding social technology and social media. We already had a policy in place for the student-athletes' use of social media which allows use, but bans certain aspects of its use. We prohibit any photos involving alcohol, regardless of age, and we remind the student-athletes not to do anything remotely close to embarrassing themselves, their families or the university.

The second part of this step was to create a policy for the staff use of social technology. An old philosophy would be to ban Facebook or



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Twitter at work, but we have adopted the stance that it should be used as long as it is professional and applicable. We explained that once work is mentioned on a personal account, it becomes a professional account which reflects the feelings of the department and the university.

Step two involved devising a plan. We needed to understand the flow of information and how to control it in an effective manner. Like anything else externally, social media and social technology are no good unless the messages are organized, efficient and effective. We had to understand how our recruits, fans, alumni and student-athletes are consuming media, and develop our own timing and planning around that. Every institution is different, so releasing something on Facebook and Twitter first might not be effective for you, because maybe some of your higher-end donors have neither. Knowing how your external stakeholders consume media through Facebook, Twitter, special email groups and your department website is critical.

Once you have developed the timing of your plan, you need to develop a daily plan. We meet as a group each week to review every detail. Every external area in an athletics department understands that content is king and the rise of social technology and social media enhances that kingdom. Once you have an idea of how your stakeholders are consuming the media and external messages, you will be much better suited to be interactive with your stakeholders.

Our third and final step in the process was re-tooling our staff. We cannot ask our communications staff to take on all of this new work without realizing two important facts: first, the athletics communications job is almost completely different than five years ago; and second, skill sets matter as much as assignments. At Niagara, we blew up the communications department structure and divided it up into four areas: revenue, social technology/social media, publicity, and statistics and operations.

In our new model, the head of the area has revenue responsibilities with staff oversight and then we have a staff member assigned to the other three areas, based on skill set and abilities. What's the point of having someone who is really good at technology, but not as good writing trying to do releases when the best writer in the office isn't good with the game operations. We expect all of our areas to have staff with certain levels of expertise, but we expect our communications staff to be "jack-of-all-the-trades." Like most other institutions, we have eliminated responsibilities like media guides, game notes, etc., so we can better serve the missions of the area — generate revenue and attract recruits.

As our business changes over the next few years, athletics directors will need to adapt over many areas. We all realize how important the blending of social technology and social media are to our departments and how our external areas can maximize our resources and our staff at I-AAA institutions. Once you have your account set up, you, too, can Tweet all about it.

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