From Phones to Facebook: How to Engage Youth on the Front Lines of Social Media

Pathways to Education, Mosaic Counselling and Family Services

A couple of years ago, my colleagues and I were spending over 150 hours a month on the phone trying to reach high school students in our program. Each time an event took place, or there was a change in our scheduling, we would have to notify several hundred teenagers by phone. The average call would take approximately 6 minutes. Of those 6 minutes, less than a minute was actually spent talking to the student. The other 5 minutes were spent doing one of the following:

1. Listening to a ring tone.

2. Getting a busy signal and redialing.

3. Listening to an automated message indicating that the number has been disconnected or changed.

4. Waiting on the phone while a parent/sibling called for a student.

5. Listening to a voice mail message.

We were doing this several times a month and it didn't make sense – especially since we were relaying notification messages that did not require a response. The amount of time we spent trying to reach students significantly overshadowed the amount of time we actually spent talking to them.

Why not just send an email instead? Other program sites had tried this and the results were abysmal: the email open rates of students were approximately 10%. How do you send email to a demographic that doesn't use email?

The answer is simple. You don't. Whether you are a front line youth worker, a parent, or a social media marketer, the question remains the same: "How do you communicate so that teenagers will listen?"

Many of our students could often be seen using Facebook at their schools and community centres, yet using Facebook as a professional tool for communicating with students had not yet been given serious consideration in our organization.

Then, we developed a social media policy using the free tool at PolicyTool.net and a small pilot project was launched. Staff were provided with the option of creating a professional Facebook account account and the results were remarkable: within a year, there was 95% staff participation and we are now saving approximately 3,600 hours annually, the equivalent of two full-time staff positions.

I have been fortunate to have the opportunity to meet weekly with a small student advisory group and they have provided valuable feedback on our program and our various projects. The students are forthright in their assessments of how our organization is using social media and their insight has provided valuable information regarding their day-to-day use of technology.

Based on my experience, here are the six trends you need to know about engaging youth with social media:

1. Facebook is now the primary online communication medium for the majority of youth in high school.

2. The majority of youth who have email accounts do not regularly check their inboxes.

3. Some youth do not use email at all, preferring to use only Facebook for online communication, since Facebook allows students to authenticate accounts with mobile phones.

4. Students with cell phones typically average between 1,200 – 1,500 sent messages per month.

5. The number of text messages sent is lower for students who use smartphones. Instead, they are using BBM, iMessage, Facebook Messenger, and Twitter.

6. SMS broadcasting is a particularly effective tool to remind and engage students of upcoming events or tasks that need to be completed.

The trends identified above are based on my experience of working with high-school aged youth who reside in economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods. I suspect these trends apply readily to many other communities in the United States and Canada. In order to get a more accurate picture of what is going on in your individual communities, just ask the youth around you. Assemble a group of youth on a regular basis and ask them what they do on a day-to-day basis with technology. It is also helpful to sign up for the social networks that they frequent and simply observe.

But let's go a little more in-depth: What do youth think about online communications?

Let's start with email. Youth generally consider email to be outdated. Some youth do not use email at all and this number has increased since Facebook started allowing accounts to be authenticated via a mobile phone. For youth who do have email accounts, the majority of youth check them infrequently, not more than once every few days days. Youth who check their email frequently report that they do so because they are receiving notices relating to school or volunteer placements. Students who may not be engaged in school or volunteer opportunities have less incentive to check emails regularly.

Youth attitudes towards email shift significantly when students are provisioned with a college or university email account. Since it is usually the primary and official means of communication with the college or university, youth report that they check it daily. However, personal accounts are still checked infrequently.

While all communication with schools and other organizations are conducted via email, nearly all communication with friends is conducted via Facebook, Twitter, text messaging, BBM, or iMessage. Students will typically only accept people into their networks that they know and trust, so it is important for youth workers to ensure that they have established a working relationship with students before communicating with them on social media channels.

When youth log into a computer, the first sites that are typically visited are Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Tumblr. Email is mentioned only as an afterthought. Facebook is regarded as a "public" space where youth can hang out, chat and make plans with friends.

In contrast, Twitter is regarded as a more "personal" space. Twitter is used to see what is going on with friends and celebrities. Youth also report that it is used for venting and saying anything that may be bothering them or whatever they may be thinking about. It has been described as a "personal feelings page" that is "better than Facebook" because it provides more of a feeling of connectedness.

If youth have access to a smartphone, both Facebook and Twitter are accessed primarily on the mobile devices. Otherwise, access is conducted primarily on desktop and laptop computers. Mobile devices, especially smartphones, are favoured because they can do all these things without having to "go on the Internet". For youth, the "traditional" way going on the Internet involves having to turn on a computer, log on, and stay in one place. Even a laptop is considered inconvenient when compared to a smartphone.

With a smartphone, youth can take whatever they are reading, searching, and/or tweeting. When considering youth-friendly spaces, wifi availability is important for students who may not be subscribed to data plans. If given the option, many students would prefer to use a smartphone over a standard cell phone without extended functionality. Currently, the favoured smartphones brands are Samsung, Blackberry, and the iPhone.

Text messaging is ubiquitous among students and, when presented with the opportunity, students appreciate receiving text message reminders of upcoming events. The ability to text pre-determined lists of people is now available on many cell phone plans, and websites such as Remind101.com are an indication that being able to reach students while protecting personal boundaries is an industry that is still nascent. FrontlineSMS can also be used by organizations with the technology capacity to implement an in-house text-messaging solution.

As a youth worker, it can be challenging to stay on top of rapidly shifting technology trends, but the efforts have been worthwhile. Utilizing social media has not only allowed our organization to better communicate and engage with our youth - it has also provided easier ways for our youth to communicate with us. The switch has allowed staff in our program to spend more time focusing on building more positive relationships with our youth and less time listening to busy signals.