

Plus One More?

A look at the newest social network on the block

By LIZ GROSS

As a new year begins, higher education professionals who manage social media are getting to know the latest social network, Google+, and how they can best use Google+ Pages to advance their institutions. When Google+ first came on the scene in late June 2011, several institutions signed up and began using the service. Patrick Powers, director of digital marketing and communications at Webster University, set up a profile for the Missouri institution. “We have an early in, early out adoption model for new technologies,” he says. It was a short-lived experiment. “We halted growth at the request of Google,” Powers says, referring to Google’s announcement—just three weeks into the invitation-only field trial—that companies and organizations (with a few exceptions) should refrain from using Google+ until it officially rolls out brand profiles. That day came early last November with the release of Google+

Pages. Within 24 hours, hundreds of higher education institutions, including Webster University, had secured their page.

NOW WHAT?

Some institutions immediately began experimenting with strategies to engage their constituents already on Google+ while trying to determine the usefulness of the new platform. Others secured their pages and went into wait-and-see mode. Many began critiquing the platform and noting things they wanted to see changed. (More than one administrator, please!) The initial launch of Pages didn’t offer much more than the personal Google+ profile experience. On its blog, Google wrote that “the initial launch of Google+ Pages brings us a little bit closer, but we’ve still got lots of improvements planned.”

Given the popularity of other Google offerings such as Gmail and YouTube and the increasing popularity of Android, which integrates with Google, it’s logical to think that many members of higher education’s target demographics—prospective and current students as well as alumni—may adopt Google+. (In mid-October, Google said the service had more than 40 million users.) As a result, many higher education professionals are exploring the tool as another way to build engagement with key constituencies.

Page managers are anxious for the integration of one of Google’s most valuable products: robust analytics. The data that Google Analytics tracks (visitors, traffic sources, content) are much more in-depth and customizable than Facebook Insights, and professionals who rely on such usage data are crossing their fingers that analytics for Google+ Pages will have capabilities similar to what Google Analytics offers.

PLUS WHAT?

Google+ offers much of the same functionality as Facebook—users can tag friends, share photos, and approve of a post or other web content by clicking +1 (its version of Facebook’s “like” button). Google+ has a clean interface and integrates some of its other product features such as video chat. In addition to connecting with people you know, as on Facebook, you can follow people you don’t, as on Twitter. Rather than sending someone a Facebook friend request, users simply add people to their circles (although your institution’s page can’t circle users until they add that page to their circles). The circle you place someone in isn’t public knowledge, so users won’t know how they’re categorized.

Circles are at the core of the appeal of Google+ and have been lauded by many privacy advocates because users can choose to share posts with the

public, only within select circles, or even with an individual. For instance, my personal circles include “higher education,” “family,” and “baseball fans.” So I can post social media statistics without boring my family, and my professional colleagues don’t have to slog through holiday photos. Updates that appear in a user’s stream, similar to Facebook’s newsfeed, can be sorted by circles as well. Users can even share the circles they’ve created so that others can connect with the people and brands they’ve found interesting, which can be particularly useful for professional networking. Circles also offer campuses the ability to segment information and distribute different messages to various constituencies.

Hangouts, the ability to have a public or private video chat with up to 10 people at a time, is one of the features that has most excited users and one that offers many possibilities for institutions. I’ve used hangouts to plan conference presentations with colleagues strewn across the country. The ability to see someone’s face adds a level of familiarity that can’t be achieved in a conference call.

I see hangouts emerging as a valuable tool to increase student engagement in the period between when students are admitted and their arrival on campus. When I began managing the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee’s university housing Facebook page a couple of years ago, I saw that students were clamoring to meet one another before classes started. A student mentor or orientation leader could host Google+ hangouts to encourage new student interaction, which could lead to students holding their own hangouts. Ideally, students would sustain these positive relationships after arriving on campus, potentially leading to higher levels of student engagement.

INEVITABLE AND INAPT COMPARISONS

Although it’s natural to try to explain Google+ in terms of its similarities to Facebook, whether a competition truly exists between the two platforms is to be

determined—and may miss the point entirely.

“We have to meet students where they are, and right now that’s Facebook,” says Rey Junco, a social media researcher, author, and associate professor at Lock Haven University in Pennsylvania.

Powers agrees: “As more and more people come online, they may choose one over the other. We’ll reach a point where both Facebook and Google+ can be used differently by different users.”

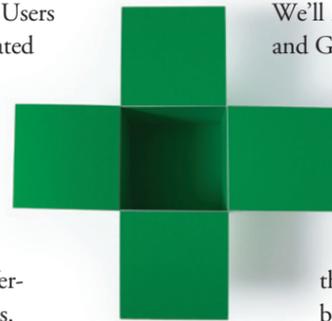
But Mark Greenfield, director of the Office of Web Services at New York’s University at Buffalo, thinks the comparison shouldn’t be made at all. “I don’t think people fully understand the capabilities of Google+ and its ability to integrate with other Google products,” he says. “Facebook is a social network, while Google+ is more of a social ecosystem.”

Students may find it easier to keep their social and academic lives separate on Google+ than on Facebook. If Google continues to integrate applications already being used on campuses, such as Gmail and Google Docs, then Google+ may become another way of doing business rather than just a place to see what your friends are doing and saying.

Comparisons, worthy or not, between the two services have been drawn from day one and are likely to continue, especially on the topic of privacy. The profit center for both Facebook and Google is advertising. By opting to use these free services, users volunteer their demographic and behavioral data and are served targeted ads as a result.

Google’s aim is to make Google+ the way people and brands interact with Google. Its +1 button will be integrated into websites and search results, making user recommendations of products, companies, and organizations visible on the world’s most popular search engine.

Junco, who sees potential for using Google+ for class discussions and sharing content with class circles, is a big fan of its privacy and security features, but he



“Platforms change, but the strategy doesn’t.”

cautions: “It’s still one social network with your data owned by a company ... the jury is still out on what they will do with the data.”

POKING AROUND

Even when his university had to press pause, Powers continued using Google+ personally and urges fellow higher education professionals to do the same.

“If you wait for Google+ to become something, you will already be behind,” he says. “It will take some time for higher education to discover what does and doesn’t work in Google+, but I think the potential for something great remains. Remember, even Facebook wasn’t built in a day.”

The key Google+ skill set, according to Greenfield, is understanding how to use and manage circles. “Mastering this aspect of the platform may help campus social media coordinators trim the number of social media accounts that claim to represent the campus,” he says. “How many Facebook pages should we have? Our campus has several hundred of them; there sometimes is duplicate information, and some aren’t official.”

Since Google+ Pages allow the sharing of different information with different groups, an institution could manage circles for several constituencies. “As business users, we could do more targeted messaging to bring people together,” Greenfield says. “We could bring together groups of geographically separated alumni into hangouts. Graduate programs could hold a virtual open house with faculty and prospective students.”

WATCHING IT DEVELOP

While a new social network may be exciting to some campus professionals who handle social media, others may view Google+ as just one more thing to add to their already full plates.

“General social media strategy is about building connections and increasing engagement,” Powers says. “Platforms change, but the strategy doesn’t. Our tactics will change, but our goals remain the same.”

“Admissions offices are expected to have Facebook pages, groups, and Twitter accounts at this point, just like major brands,” Junco points out. “When adoption reaches critical levels, there will be an expectation to be [on Google+].”

At a large institution, adopting a new tool will take time, says Greenfield, so his advice is to “approach it from a grassroots level: bottom-up rather than top-down.” He urges campus communicators to “look at Google+ with a very open mind. Don’t think about it within the context of your current tools; try to expand the boundaries of what this can do.”

For those who manage communication and social media on small campuses, including myself, Google+ is another tool that a generalist will need to manage. I claimed our Google+ Page as soon as possible and made sure it contains all of the factual information our constituents would expect to find. At this point, I need to bring others on board to help it grow. (At the time of publication, Google+ allowed only one user to administer a page—a situation that page managers are dissatisfied with and one of many changes Google says it’s working on.) Motivated staff in student affairs, athletics, and academic disciplines can be excellent members of a social media team. Ideally, I’ll also enlist the help of students to actively create content, monitor engagement, and respond to questions. Although a certain degree of supervision and training is required, I believe students can effectively represent our campus when we don’t have the resources to dedicate professional staff to the task.

Like any social tool, there’s nothing wrong with joining in to watch and listen. Since Google+ allows circle sharing, you could start by connecting with the professionals featured in this article and asking them to share their relevant circles with you. Instantly, you could be connected to hundreds of higher education professionals on Google+.

It would require a crystal ball to predict how higher education will use Google+ in 2012. Prudent professionals will not dismiss Google+ Pages because they failed to debut with flashy features, but rather recognize the rapid growth of this new social tool and the potential to leverage popular Google products that are already in widespread use on many college campuses. As with all new technologies, some of us will learn through failure. My advice: Fail fast, share your experience, learn from others, and try again. ■

Liz Gross is the director of marketing and communications at the University of Wisconsin-Waukesha. She blogs at lizgross.me.

COPYRIGHT ©2012 BY THE COUNCIL FOR ADVANCEMENT AND SUPPORT OF EDUCATION; REPRINTED WITH PERMISSION FROM THE JANUARY 2012 ISSUE OF CURRENTS. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.