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—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
Although it’s natural to try to explain Google+ in terms of its similarities to Facebook, whether a comparison 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 Key Junco, a social media researcher, author, and associate professor at Lock Haven University in Pennsylvania.

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+, 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, businesses, 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 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.

“Just because you have a blog doesn’t mean you will start using it,” he says. “It takes time for higher education to discover what works and doesn’t work in Google+.”

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. 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.”

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