Social media-first marketing: A case study of leveraging influencers

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ABSTRACT

Generation Z spends most of their day on mobile devices and institutions are trying to disrupt that space to encourage engagement with their brand. In October 2016, Drake University leveraged social media, public relations and word-of-mouth tactics to lure a world-famous rapper (Drake) to its campus, eventually resulting in the most traffic to its website since it was created in 1997. This paper will discuss the ways Drake University benefits from a social media-first strategy approach, examples of how they are adopting this strategy and why other institutions may benefit.

Keywords

generation Z, social media, influencers, native content, organic content, engagement, Drake University, #BringDraketoDrake

INTRODUCTION

Marketing your institution on social media is no longer a unique (or even free) way to reach a target audience of prospective students. It is becoming an anchor in marketing plans and even a small social media advertising budget pushes content a long way. Prospective students and their families are not solely relying on social media to influence their decisions, but they are using them as a way to research the culture of an institution. It is ideal to ensure authenticity comes through in the content around your brand — whether you created it or not. There are four strategies every institution can adopt from a social media-first approach: testing content on social media first, paying to play, leveraging influencers, and adapting your content to what is engaging natively, or making it authentic. Below, you will learn how Drake University, a private university in Des Moines, Iowa, practices these strategies. You will see in a small case study demonstrating how they leveraged the fame of rapper and influencer Drake to drive record traffic to their website with the social media campaign #BringDraketoDrake.

MARKETING TO GEN-Z

Generation Z (Gen-Z) is the post-millennial generation that is also referred to as Founders, Plurals, iGen or Digital Natives. According to Pew Research date ranges, millennials are made up of people born between the years of 1981 and 1997, making Gen-Z anyone born after 1997. This generation has grown up with...
mobile devices integrated into their lives. Few of them remember, or were even alive during the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The next generation will be Generation Alpha (people born in the year 2015 to date).

Today, members of Gen-Z are online about 10 hours a day. They are digital natives and are not making conscious decisions to consume content online, because they live there. In fact, the only content they consume is online. Higher education institutions need not only to find and disrupt them in space, but find a way to live in it to remain top of mind.

There is plenty of research on how to market to millennials and many are quick to label them as a challenging generation. Millennials have a reputation for being lazy, privileged, fame-obsessed and materialistic. The *Time Magazine* article about millennials ‘The Me Me Me Generation’ says those negative traits are actually an adaptation to their environment. They are not lazy, they are finding efficiencies in life through technology. They do not have a failure to launch, they are simply maximising their resources while they can by living with their parents longer. Most millennial-aged students have already graduated out of our institutions — unless they are graduate students. Institutions are now marketing to Gen-Z, and there is less research on what makes up the youngest, and largest, generation. Millennials have about US$200bn in direct purchasing power and account for US$500bn more in indirect spending through influencing their parents. So far, data show that Gen-Z has a buying power of only US$44bn, even though they are larger than the millennial population by 3m.

**GEN-Z ON SOCIAL MEDIA**

Like the assumptions that millennials are a challenging generation, many make assumptions on social media consumption of both millennials and Gen-Z. Most claim that people are fleeing Facebook to newer platforms such as Snapchat. Pew Research Center shows that Facebook is still king as the most-used social media platform across generations, but Instagram is the fastest growing (especially for Gen-Z and millennials). Many other studies place Facebook as the preferred platform across generations, with YouTube, Instagram and Twitter taking second place in various forms. There are little data on Snapchat as they have little to no platform analytics, but some self-reported studies still place the platform below Facebook and Instagram.

Drake University’s Instagram follower data reflect that the audience is aged 18–24. Many insist that ‘older’ generations of millennials and even Generation X are taking over Facebook, forcing Gen-Z to other platforms. Drake’s Facebook page follower data do not reflect trends that indicate an aging user base. Consistently, over half of their followers on Facebook are aged 18–24. Those numbers decrease slightly when you look at people reached and people engaged, but Facebook is still preferred by all of Drake’s main audiences — prospective and current students and alumni. Snapchat is growing quickly among Gen-Z, but many Drake University students say they go to the platform to engage with friends and to get away from brands. Snapchat also has no official analytics reports unless you purchase geofilters. There is no magic answer on where your audience is, but you can make strategic decisions based on the analytics the platform provides you. Let your data speak for you, not generalised trends. Try to let your content live where it thrives most. Drake University’s LinkedIn page has its biggest audience, but also its
most passive when it comes to engagement. Many institutions report the same audience insights during Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE) Twitter chats. Sometimes, an objective for a piece of news fits the performance of high reach, low engagement and would thrive on LinkedIn. Remember to watch your audience insights in conjunction with your content analytics to continue optimising your strategy.

**AUTHENTICITY**

A common finding from studies about marketing to millennials or Gen-Z is that they crave authenticity. Drake discovered this from focus groups among their students and saw it reflected in their engagement analytics. Students know when they are being marketed to and when they come across this over-produced or inauthentic content, they do not engage. The days of making advertising surprising or provocative are over. Drake has spent time creating graphic promotions similar to traditional print postcards for campus speakers or athletic events and found that in practice this content falls flat on social media. Most social media platforms were designed to share photos, not text graphics, so brands should try to play by those rules if they want to get their message across. Authentic content that matches what audiences engage with natively is what stands out for the brand.

Drake University is not (yet) the model for a social media-first marketing strategy, but they have seen results in materials that indicate benefits to this approach. Prospective students trust their peers as influencers. Drake has evidence from their focus groups that later in the recruitment cycle prospective students ignore carefully crafted materials showing life on campus. Instead, they go directly to social media to see an authentic picture. Some international students at Drake step foot on campus for the first time when they move in. They know it snows, and they want to see what that is like. What kind of food can they find around campus? What will their friends look like?

Drake University was hearing from its two main audiences — prospective students and alumni — that they wanted to see what the student of today looks like. What do they see every day? How do they live and study? How has the landscape of the campus changed? Today, everyone is a photographer and videographer, and students are influencers of their institution’s brand and demonstrators of the institution’s experience. This led Drake to create a student-led Instagram account, @OnPaintedStreet, which tells the Drake experience story through the lens of a different Drake University student each week.

The communications team at Drake has been running this student-led Instagram account for three years. They field applications each semester and design a semester showing a diverse student population, highlighting varying disciplines and extracurricular activities on campus. One week, a football athlete may take the account while he has a game and the next week a student takes it while they are directing a theatre production. Students use the account to show off cool internships, study abroad experiences or simply who they hang out with while studying. Recently, a student took over the account while interning with the Atlanta Braves over the summer. In November 2015, Drake University hosted the Democratic National Committee’s presidential debate on campus. The national network CBS was the debate’s main broadcaster and they hired ten Drake students as...
interns. That group of students took over the account and shared their behind-the-scenes access with the audience.

Drake saw a plateau in engagement on both the Drake University Instagram and the Drake University Admissions Facebook page when this account was shared. The content from @OnPaintedStreet was authentic and influencers were promoting the Drake University brand. While the audience was not engaging as much with the university’s main social media accounts, they were still reaching the return on the objective of learning about the brand through social media content. The engagement with this student-led account has been so successful that the content was sourced for elevated placement on the www.drake.edu homepage and in the admission viewbook.

Institutions can replicate this kind of authentic content for their main platforms by crowdsourcing content from their influencers. Search for photos taken on your campus, search hashtags that tie the content to a particular subject or follow the top influencers of your brand. Always ask permission to share. You can also watch the content that performs well organically and match it, while still adhering to your brand’s integrity. For example, the most engaging content on Instagram are pictures of people’s food, pets, children and feet. Drake is the home of the long-running Beautiful Bulldog Contest, which is a creator of high-engaging social media content.

**SOCIAL MEDIA-ONLY CONTENT**

Social media should be part of your overall editorial strategy — and some content may only need to live on social media. If you have editorial meetings and a story relies heavily on imagery, consider letting it live first (and maybe only) on social media. Develop campaigns that only live on social media like alumni or student profiles. Audiences engage with content they can relate to and love seeing people they know. Determine how to take a seemingly stale story or objective and make it engaging for social media.

Drake University hosts the Drake Relays every year in April. This track and field event attracts Olympic athletes to compete on the famous Blue Oval, and Drake alumni to join the week-long celebration around the event. One of their most engaging pieces of promotional content was a video of the live mascot Griff, an English Bulldog, running enthusiastically under a hurdle. Olympic athletes were even engaging with the video, correcting the form of the four-legged athlete and wishing they could adopt his form. Drake was matching the kind of content audiences engage with organically — that is, anything with animals. The video was short, only five seconds, and had no lead-in or end slides with the logo. It was created to be consumed quickly and the audience responded. On a page of only 5,000 followers on the Drake Relays Facebook page, the video reached 34,000 people, and 50 people clicked on the link to buy tickets to Drake Relays. This is an example of authentic content the university created to live only on social media, while still driving an objective of purchasing relays tickets.

Drake also tests content on social media first to see how the audience will react to it. As free analytics within a platform become more available and robust, the ability to personalise content becomes easier. Drake completed construction on two buildings in the summer of 2017 and gave Snapchat tours of those spaces. While they only had story view analytics...
to drive our decisions, they did get many replies from alumni envious of the new space. In particular, alumni found a maths classroom with white boards on every wall most intriguing. A few weeks later, the team set up professional shots with students in those spaces to share on Facebook to a broader audience and used the photos in donor pieces. All of that started with a ten second snap.

INFLUENCERS
As we have determined, social media content is most engaging when it matches native content. Institutions such as Drake University, Butler University and the University of Georgia have built-in engagement with their live Bulldog mascots. Everyone loves dogs — and that engagement translates on Instagram especially well. Institutions are celebrating the success of their famous alumni in the hope they will engage with the content and increase its reach. We know that anytime Professional Golfer’s Association (PGA) golfer and Drake alumnus Zach Johnson engages with @DrakeUniversity tweets they see a spike in followers, engagement, and reach. The team pays attention to which platforms each influencer prefers and engage with them there. For Zach Johnson, Twitter is his preferred platform — for rapper Aubrey ‘Drake’ Graham, it is Instagram (more on that later).

Influencers are becoming essential in the future of social media. Specifically, celebrities have a built-in audience and seemingly personal relationship with fans, therefore they make for effective influencers. Kara Alter from Shimmur, a Gen-Z focused media company, said, ‘The future of media is audience-first. Companies that take cues from influencers and include fans in all aspects of content production — from story development to casting, filming, marketing, and distribution — will see much higher engagement and loyalty among Gen-Z.’

Influencer content is short and authentic, making it easy for Gen-Z to consume. Videos for beauty subscription boxes such as Fit, Fab, Fun are completely reliant on influencers to market their content. The subscription box is full of beauty products and their sole strategy is to have C-list celebrities open a subscription box using Facebook live videos. These celebrities have a built-in audience and they are giving every item in that subscription box an endorsement when they explore its contents. But, how can we mirror this in higher education?

If your institution does not share the namesake of a world-famous rapper, look at other ways to take advantage of influencers. A good place to start is Google Trends. Look at peak times your institution has been searched, giving you insight into trends that put you in the national spotlight. Many universities see peaks in December or January for college football bowl games or in March for basketball. It became a tradition for eight years that President Barack Obama reveal his National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) bracket picks by writing on a huge bracket in the White House. The president unsuccessfully picked Kansas to win twice, but the university can still claim the president chose them to win a national championship, leveraging that influencer content. It did not matter that the president’s picks ended up in the 39.5th percentile nationwide — it was his national recognition that matters to your audience.

If you incorporate celebrities or influencers in your content, they are not guaranteed to engage with it, but you can still use their status as leverage.
Casual NCAA basketball fans may not remember the score from a Kentucky basketball game, for example, but they may remember that actress Ashley Judd is a huge Kentucky basketball fan. Tap into your famous alumni, your famous fans and maybe even serendipitous brand associations such as Drake University and the rapper, Drake (if only there was a Swift University).

**PAY TO PLAY**

In focus groups with students from Drake University, participants said they never viewed printed materials. They either gave them to parents or older siblings to examine, or even threw them away. They do recall seeing YouTube ads for other brands and relying on influencers to help make their decisions. Whether or not this is true with students at your institution, a presence on social media is important. Social media is still a free way to reach an audience, but only 4 per cent of your Facebook followers are seeing your organic content. If you spend just a little bit, it will go a long way and reach a lot more of your audience. By now, institutions have received the attention of their most engaging influencers — alumni, current students, and faculty and staff. Perhaps your year-over-year follower data have slowed or plateaued. Drake University has seen this, yet their reach has grown each year because of advertising. The challenge now is to find new followers and cast a wider net for prospective students and parents. Every major social media platform has some form of advertising and all of them let you work within your budget.

Drake uses targeted ads to successfully identify influencers in the wild. They opened two new buildings on campus in the autumn of 2017, including a new home for their School of Education that was previously located off campus. Leading up to the dedication, the team targeted pictures of the new Collier-Scripps Hall to Facebook users who identify as alumni of the School of Education. One alumna did not even know they had been building the hall, showing that the ad found more alumni ‘in the wild’ with this targeted boost. They also targeted that same post to prospective students and their parents. They found that parents were tagging their children as prospective students in the comments asking if they had considered Drake yet, to which we replied with the URLs to apply and visit. This approach drives traffic directly to your website from social media content, and is driven by targeted ads. While the photos in these posts will be used in other materials, the content lived first on social media and has accompanying data to show its success with our audience.

**#BRINGDRAKETODRAKE CAMPAIGN CASE STUDY**

The #BringDraketoDrake campaign is an example of how to marry these concepts into one risky, but rewarding, approach. In May 2016, Drake University’s communications team learned that multiple Grammy award-winning rapper Drake had scheduled a first-ever performance in the university’s hometown of Des Moines, Iowa. Students had joked for years about inviting the ‘Hotline Bling’ star to campus, but now the communications team saw a real opportunity to launch a multifaceted promotional campaign that engaged current and prospective students. Within two hours of the rapper’s concert announcement, the university’s communications team published a brief, strategic, pun-filled media statement inviting the rapper to campus.
The news release (encouraging Drizzy Drake to see the campus’ ‘Views’ — a reference to the rapper’s most recent album) was shared on Facebook 3,400 times, retweeted 600 times from Drake University’s Twitter feed, and covered by *People Magazine*, *Entertainment Weekly* and *MTV*. Journalists hailed it as the ‘Best PR move of the week’ (Brandon McCauley, Kare 11 News, Twin Cities); prospective students declared on Twitter, ‘With this, I fully commit to Drake University and I can’t wait to attend in the fall of 2017’; and alumni/prospective donors tweeted ‘Please take all of my money.’ Our team was quick to respond with instructions for applying or donating.

The #BringDrakeToDrake campaign was officially born. A local T-shirt shop’s custom apparel (with a version of the Drake Bulldogs mascot bearing the rapper’s head) elevated the campaign in central Iowa. At staff suggestion, students produced hype videos and memes of the rapper superimposed on images of campus. The students also used the app called Drake Shake, which photoshopped a photo of Drake onto photos from your phone. The university used this app to make hilariously photoshopped images that the president shared, and that the official university accounts shared across platforms. The campaign grew over the summer until the day prior to the rapper’s Des Moines concert on 4th October, 2016, when it hit the stratosphere: Drizzy Drake himself left a comment on a university Instagram post, saying ‘I’mma pull

FIGURE 1  Rapper Aubrey Drake Graham, known to most as Drake, posed on top of the Drake University campus sign and posted this image to his Instagram
Source: @champagnepapi Instagram.
up on ya.’ The comment was covered by local media and a real buzz generated among the campus community.

The day of Drake’s concert was one of the most memorable in the campus’ recent history, with thousands of Drake students (the undergraduate population is about 3,300) and some faculty and staff gathering in search of the rapper. It is rare that thousands of students are gathered on the front lawn of the university’s iconic Old Main building, and this day gathered students dancing and racing across campus, always chasing rumours of a tour bus. Although Drake did not make a daytime appearance, he took the stage at Des Moines’ Wells Fargo Arena in custom Drake University branded clothing provided by arena and university PR staff. Images of Drake in his custom Drake University letterman’s jacket and basketball jersey were printed by news outlets around the world, on a Twitter Moment and took centre stage on the rapper’s own Instagram feed. Later that night, the rapper showed up on campus, sparking yet another wave of international news coverage. His simple caption on the Instagram post was @DrakeUniversity, which gave the Drake University Instagram account 500 new followers every 15 minutes for half a working day. University communications staff stuck a pair of vinyl footprints on the spot where the rapper had crouched — and campus visitors continue to recreate Drizzy’s famous pose, many months after the concert (Figure 1). A tweet of those feet became the university’s most engaging tweet of all time.

REACHING THE GEN-Z AUDIENCE

The overall social media objectives of Drake University focus on promoting their brand, attracting prospective students and maintaining a relationship with alumni. The #BringDrakeToDrake campaign had a hand in reaching each of those objectives, while strongly weighing on the role of attracting and recruiting prospective students.

The goal in the campaign was to attract prospective students, particularly a large segment we do not typically reach. The majority of Drake University students are from the Midwest and this campaign introduced Drake University to a much wider audience, but still to the age demographic of their prospective students. To illustrate this point, a dozen prospective-age students across the nation tweeted, ‘Is it too late to transfer?’ to which the @DrakeUniversity Twitter handle would always reply with the link to apply. The @DrakeUniversity handle was also getting tweets from that audience asking if Drake was a real university. The university always took those tweets as an opportunity to share the visit or apply links, which are the two main objectives of the admissions office.

Secondarily, this was a fun campaign for anyone associated with the Drake University brand, including alumni. Drake University’s voice on social media is playful, but still prestigious as to adhere to Drake’s overall brand integrity. Finally, even if the rapper had not come to campus, it was a memorable day for students. More than one-third of the undergraduate population waited for the rapper outside their iconic Old Main building, acting only on a hunch or rumours. It was a memorable day in their time as a Bulldog. The university took what could have been a one-day, 15-minutes of fame marketing push and adapted it strategically into a longer-term campaign that had an impact on Drake’s institutions communication objectives.

The perception of higher education is one of being risk-averse and stodgy.
This campaign was a calculated risk that positioned Drake University as a brand that stood out in the industry. It is also an example of how the entire office collaborated extensively to combine skills in media relations, social media, real-time marketing and word-of-mouth to fulfil their objectives, without damaging the integrity of the brand.

RESULTS
Drake saw record traffic to the university website — higher than when the university hosted nationally televised presidential candidate debates — including significant spikes in visits to pages that are directly associated with the admissions process. The Drake homepage saw 13,300 visitors on the day of the rapper’s visit, compared to an average of 3,000 visitors per day the prior month. Visits to the undergraduate programmes page tripled and the campus visit page traffic doubled. Perhaps most importantly, the undergraduate application page saw 1,769 visitors, compared to an average of 750 visitors per day in the preceding month. Journalists wrote more than 200 news stories, including coverage by Time, People, USA Today, Good Morning America, TMZ, MTV, BET, Mashable, The Chronicle of Higher Education and other outlets across broadcast, web and print media. Iowa’s largest daily newspaper, The Des Moines Register, wrote five stories about the campaign, including a front-page article. The university’s Instagram following doubled in two days and its Instagram posts reached 2m people.

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS
The #BringDraketoDrake campaign was ultimately a student-driven campaign; however, the Office of University Communications worked closely with all key campus partners throughout the entire campaign. When it was rumoured that the rapper might stop by the campus, public safety was kept in the loop the entire time. The team also made sure senior leadership was up-to-date with the mood of the crowd on campus, as well as any communication the team received from the rapper’s handlers. All of these factors played heavily into the success of the campaign. Had they not been managed appropriately, there could have been considerable risk.

CONCLUSION
Social media should be employed on the front-lines of an integrated marketing and communications strategy because social platforms provide an opportunity to reach audiences that you can’t reach elsewhere. A social media-first strategy must be driven by data and content must align with the organic behaviour of consumers on those platforms.

It is true that not every institution has a direct connection with a celebrity, but you do have influencers. Watch your analytics closely and examine what stands out over a week, a month or a year on your platforms. Share that data and insights with the rest of your team so they can also start thinking of the social-first strategies. Develop relationships with your influencers by celebrating them and sharing their content.

Our social media-first strategy starts with asking the question, ‘How can we tell this story on social media?’ If you look at your own strategies, you may find that you are already modelling a social media-first strategy. This approach is important because our audience lives in this environment. Above, we have
highlighted ways we tested content first on social media before implementing it in more expensive media such as print or video (the 360-degree white board snap). We showed the value of leveraging influencers to enhance engagement around your brand (#BringDraketoDrake), that pay-to-play does pay off (Collier-Scripps Hall) and that sometimes our content only lives on social media (Griff during Drake Relays).

REFERENCES


(10) Gustafson, ref. 5 above.

