

# You Agreed to Teach WHAT? How to Succeed in a Social Media Marketing Course!

OUTSTANDING PAPER: Education/Experiential Learning

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## Abstract

Social media marketing can be a challenging course to teach. Faculty teaching this course must constantly strive to keep the course up to date. There is a wide variation in the types of resources used to facilitate student learning as well as key learning objectives and assessment methods for this course. Tips for how to succeed in a social media marketing course are provided. Exit interviews conducted in Spring 2019 also share additional insight on what students are looking for when taking this course. Finally, suggestions are provided on issues needing more exploration and study for those involved in teaching and research in social media marketing.

## Introduction

Social Media Marketing is not a run-of-the-mill marketing course. Those teaching it agree that it requires constant preparation and describe the course as one in “perpetual development.” (Munoz and Wood) Recent studies involving faculty responsible for the social media curriculum in undergraduate institutions identify multiple challenges in teaching a social media course.

The first challenge involves the wide variations in course titles used. Brocato, White, Bartkus and Brocato found while Social Media Marketing was the most common course title, other variations for this course include digital marketing, social media and internet marketing along with numerous unique course names. Their study annotated 28 distinct course names from 90 syllabi at 65 different schools.

Munoz and Wood in their review of how social media has been integrated into the undergraduate curriculum identified additional challenges faculty face – namely, selecting material to deliver their course content. A variety of textbooks are used, but two are cited most often – Social Media Marketing: Tuten and Solomon, and Social Media Marketing: A Strategic Approach: Barker, Barker, Bormann, Zahay and Roberts. Not all faculty require a text (textbooks were only used by forty percent of the instructors in Munoz and Wood’s sample)

and many supplement the course with popular press articles, videos and experiential learning activities like exercises, certifications and presentations. In a third study, Atwong advocates the merits of an action-learning approach through a social media practicum. Atwong says students learn best when they are given an opportunity to work with social media platforms and technology in a virtual laboratory.

The biggest challenge to teaching this course by far is the time and effort required to keep up with all of the changes. Munoz and Wood said 78% of respondents cited this as their number one challenge, followed by a lack of timely resources (22%) and third, a wide variation in student knowledge, skill and attitude (21%).

### *Discussion*

This paper reflects on lessons learned from a seasoned teacher with more than a decade of experience teaching digital marketing courses for marketing majors and minors in the Business Program. The focus of this paper will discuss how the Social Media Marketing course now in its third year at a Mid Atlantic University has evolved.

The core of the course is built around a social media marketing plan and mini case studies focused on how companies are using social media to build their overall brand and drive business modeled around the course text: *Social Media Marketing: A Strategic Approach*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, by Barker, Barker, Bormann, Zahay and Roberts. In addition to the text, the course is supported many industry trade newsletters and podcasts from the AMA, PRSA, Direct Marketing News, eMarketer, HubSpot and others.

The social media marketing plan has gone through several variations. Students have had the opportunity to study student incubator companies, local companies surrounding the university, a military sponsored organization, and national companies. Some of the projects have involved competitions at the course level or across the Business School. New components have been added to the plan, one of the most critical is the creation of an infographic that can be used by the company on its social media platforms to promote brand awareness, push a new product or service, or promote a cause it supports. Up until recently, mini case studies have been facilitated through the text, but future mini case studies will allow students to select their own examples of businesses engaging in social media activities.

The course begins by discussing the significance of social media for businesses and consumers, as well as current trends and the differences between traditional marketing and social media marketing. Early discussion areas in the course focus on topics related to the social media marketing plan such as how social media goals are different from business and marketing goals. The course also includes an in-depth discussion of personas and how personas can vary across social media platforms. Team-based workshops in class allow students to identify and create

descriptions of personas for their company of study. The core of the course examines key concepts and best practices for leading social media platforms including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, LinkedIn, blogs, and podcasts. The course also shows students how to create an effective social media calendar for the social media plan. Additional emphasis is placed on hashtags, emojis and social media content themes. Final topics in the course include the role of social media influencers and ethical issues social media marketers face today. “Hot” discussion topics relating to social media are dropped into the course to facilitate class discussion. One topic in spring 2019, looked at how Fortnite is changing marketing as we know it with its tie to YouTube, eSports, influencers and Generation Z.

Teaching this course and other digital marketing courses require passion and a constant desire to improve the course. Instructors that share this vision will be successful.

1	Read and absorb everything! There are lots of ways to organize popular press articles. I have found it helpful to file by year, then by topic. Find a system that works best for you, the key is to be organized so when you go to update your content you already have a head start on what might be relevant and new.
2	Keep a record of all your online sources and begin with those sources each year you update your content for each topic. Examples include sources like Statista and others.
3	Follow the trends, from year to year and during the past five years. Relay key points to the class. This helps to show key years where a trend really got started. This type of exercise is great for discussion in class too!
4	Incorporate subject matter experts where you can. It doesn't always have to be an in-class speaker. It can be a Skype interview, a YouTube interview, a summary of a recent presentation by a professional speaker at a workshop and/or conference, etc.
5	Follow companies that are movers and shakers on social media. Make a note of any companies that are a good example and think about how you can integrate them into your lecture.
6	Look to the class for those willing to share their experiences whether it be through an internship or part-time job. You may even have a micro influencer in your midst, ask what they are currently doing in terms of social media. This applies to your current class as well as past classes.
7	Look for case studies and companies you can do a "mini spotlight" on for current cutting-edge topics and in class discussion. I have created mini spotlights on Gen Z and YouTube marketing, National Geographic and Instagram, IHOP and IHOB, and the recent Facebook outage discussing why you shouldn't put all your eggs in one basket when it comes to social media platforms.
8	Tie your course content to the project and in-class work sessions so students have an opportunity to apply what they are learning. Related to this point, set aside a full class period if you can where each team can have 15-20 minutes of one on one with the instructor to share challenges, a creative or two, and content themes prior to the class presentations.
9	Share past examples of work from your students to inspire the current class.
10	Be connected on LinkedIn to expand your resources. Don't be afraid to reach out to your network and ask for help.

*Table 27: Ten Tips for Success for Keeping it Relevant in a Social Media Course*

## Results

This paper concludes with exit interviews from 29 students in the course from the spring 2019 semester. Students were asked to reflect on various aspects of the course. The sample included 19 marketing majors, 7 marketing minors and 3 students in other related majors that took the course. (Figure 1) All of the students in the course had taken the required pre-requisite, Principles of Marketing and the majority of the students had taken consumer behavior and global marketing prior to this course. Several of the students had also taken market research and internet marketing. This course is one of the most popular in the department (it closes within 48 hours following registration) and tends to be taken the semester prior to graduation or within a year from graduation along with other marketing electives.

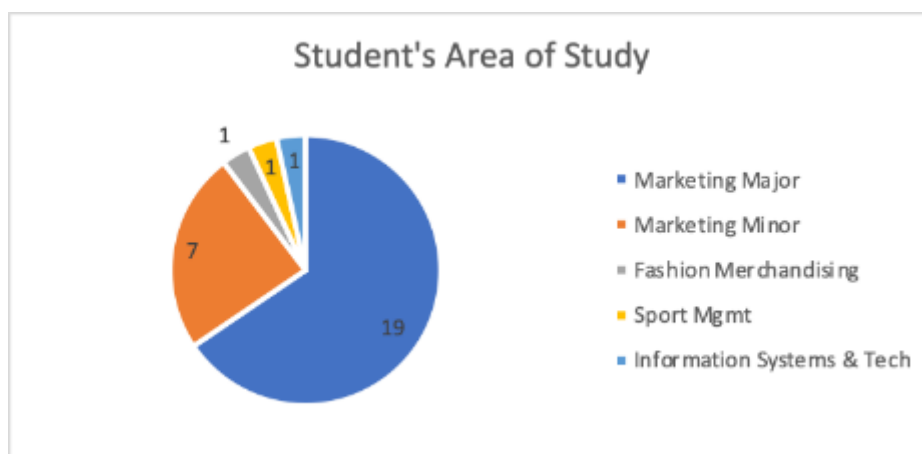


Figure 8: Student's Area of Study

When asked what their favorite aspect of the course was, a variety of responses were given, but the response most commonly provided (8 of 29 students surveyed) was how the course focused on best practices and application. They also liked examples as it furthered their understanding of key concepts discussed in class. Several other responses centered around the social media platforms themselves. (Figure 2)

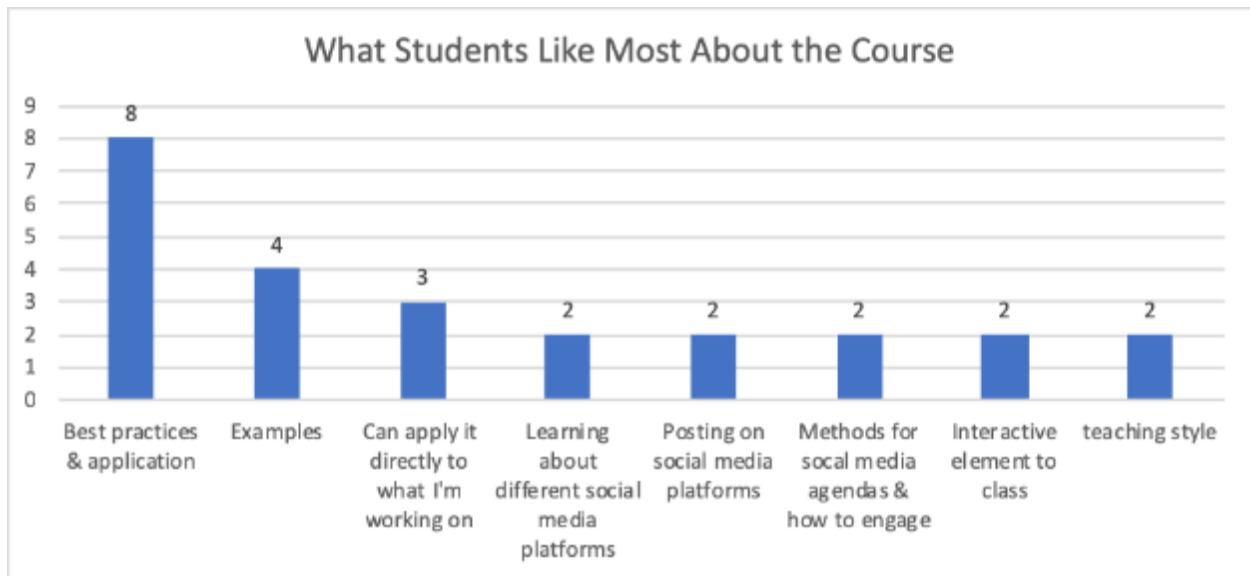


Figure 9: Most Like About the Course

In terms of what to change (Figure 3), students shared a variety of responses mostly focused on “more” of some topic or activity they thought would benefit them such as smaller case studies that looked at how companies are utilizing different social media platforms and interactive hands-on activities where students could potentially run their own social media account. Seven students in the course replied with “nothing”.

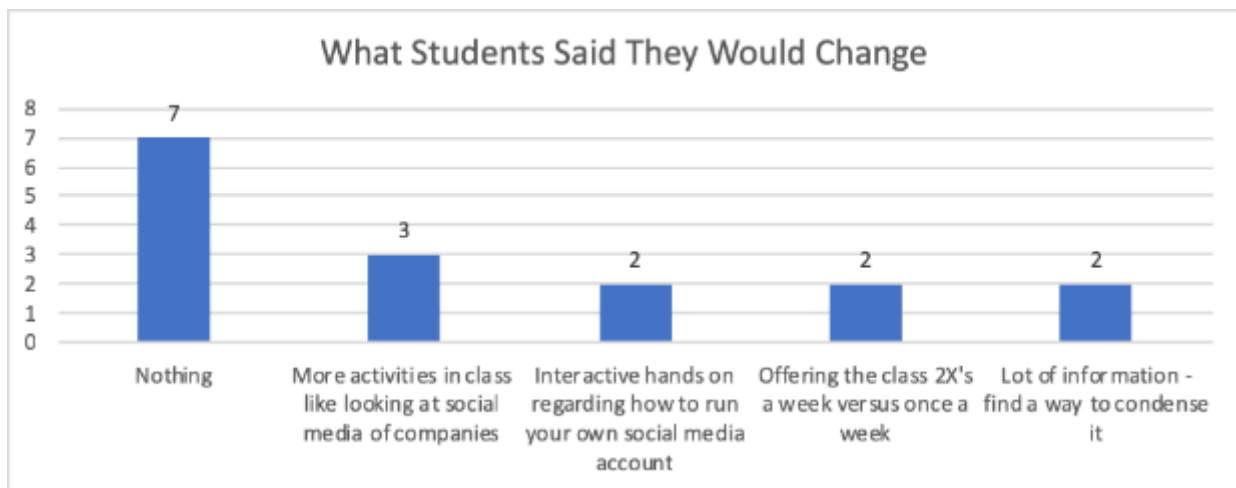


Figure 10: What They Would Change

The next two questions asked students what they would add followed by what they would drop in terms of course content. What they would add was quite varied (Figure 4). Students did provide several good ideas on where content could potentially be expanded or highlighted such as focused time on crafting captions on social media platforms, discussing how to vary content across different platforms to better reach the target persona, understanding how social media

innovators build their following and how a student might grow their personal account on Linked In and other platforms. There was an interest in social media influencers, but the instructor attributes that interest to the fact that the class had just discussed the topic prior to the survey. The most interesting finding in this survey is that most students shared they would not drop any of the current topics in the course, and many additionally wrote next to this question that they found all of the topics relevant and helpful. This makes determining how to add small topics without taking out current topics a little more challenging, but perhaps some topics could be shortened to make room for more in-depth examples. Several students did indicate that this would be helpful in an earlier section of the survey.

What Students Said They Would Add	Responses
Tools to filter fraudulent influencers	1
More on how companies find influencers	2
Social media influencers - pros and cons & compensation	1
Guest speaker on influencer marketing (someone successful in this area)	1
Influencer marketing hub	1
Selling products through Instagram	1
Instagram audit	1
A class where students update/create LinkedIn profile	1
Entire chapter on LinkedIn	1
How to grow your personal account	2
More on captions and posts for different platforms	1
Strategies on different platforms	2
How to post the same thing across different platforms but differently	1
Strategies based on company size	1
Facebook promotions	1

Ask the class what social media platform they use the most & why	1
Software & analytics	1
Social media innovators (Those famous on social media) - How they built their following	1
Negative effects of social media	1
How to repair a failing social media strategy	1
Free speech in different countries & how that effects social media	1
Social media for small & new business	1
Starting a business or freelancing in social media management	1
Marketing on apps	1

*Table 2: What They Would Add*

### *Conclusion*

Overall, students appear to be very enthusiastic about the course in terms of what they have learned and how they will use this knowledge following graduation. A follow-up study will be conducted with summer term students asking a similar set of questions as well as their thoughts on the newly revised mini case study assignment that will allow students to create a case study of their own.

### *Directions for Future Research*

Future research and exploration are needed on social media marketing as it applies to teaching at the undergraduate level. It could provide multiple benefits including helping faculty better structure their courses, select teaching materials, and meet the needs of students as the industry continues to evolve. Follow-up research could be conducted on the initial literature review studies to see if there are more commonalities in course titles, selecting the course textbook and in the types of topics discussed in a typical social media marketing course. It would also be worth exploring if faculty are getting better at managing the workload for this course and what strategies seem to work best for keeping the course fresh and topical.

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*Keywords:* social media, social media marketing, social media curriculum, social media course content, best practices.

*Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and Practitioners:* Social media marketing has become a critical component of the marketing curriculum as a stand-alone course and as a key element to other courses like public relations and internet marketing. Universities have developed specific concentrations as well as courses in social media marketing to meet the growing needs of industry.

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