The Benefits of Social Media for the Athletic Director

BY PATRICK McHUGH

High school athletic directors take note – people are talking about you and your athletic department through social media all the time, and you should consider engaging in that conversation. Just search the words “Athletic Director” in Twitter and see how frequently those words appear. It is often hundreds of times a day.

School athletics is the most public area of education today, and social media is the new public square where everyone is equal and shooting off opinions about athletic programs. Athletic directors should be aware about what is being said and take part in and help shape the discussion.

Athletic directors have had growing responsibilities as communicators during the past two decades. Although the role for years seemed to be primarily one of facilitator, involving scheduling, hiring, purchasing and monitoring, gradually it has expanded to include communicator. What is going on in athletics? How do athletic departments advance the educational mission of schools? Why should anyone be excited? These are all questions that people are talking about and answers are needed from athletic directors.

Despite what may seem like a vehicle for people to critically attack a school’s program, social media provides athletic directors the chance to think before they speak. Through writing and revising thoughts, athletic directors can more clearly communicate why their schools or athletic departments are doing what they are doing.

The three most common social media platforms being used and worth investigating are Facebook, Twitter and blogging.

Facebook

Facebook is probably the most prevalent social networking service available. There are about 750 million users who create a profile that can include photos, contact information and interests. Through “friending” or being “friended,” you can keep in contact casually with a large group of people.

Most people keep in contact through status updates that alert friends about what they are doing. You can also link your Facebook page to other social media like Twitter, Blogger or Foursquare updates. Many in your school community have probably created Interest Groups. A Facebook Group is easy to set up for your athletic department and allows you to control posting. You can subscribe to Groups as well and receive updates.

Facebook can be an effective way to communicate and have fun, but it is not without controversy. Once you are on Facebook, you are connected to people in your community in ways that sometimes you do not expect. An example of this is tagging. Someone can take your picture and “tag you.” This allows you to see it, but the entire Facebook community can also see it, which can lead to embarrassment for some. The opposite is also true when you might see a picture of someone in your community – a student for example – saying or doing something that does not live up to the standards of your community. This can put you in an uncomfortable position as to what you should do about what you see on Facebook.
There are ways to adjust privacy settings that can occasionally be circumvented. In the past year, *The New York Times* wrote an article about how college students spend a lot of time on Sundays untagging themselves from unflattering pictures taken on Friday or Saturday night. It is important for schools to have Facebook policies for the administration, faculty and staff, and discouraging “friending” students is probably advisable.

**Twitter**

Twitter was created initially as a micro-blogging service. Tweets are text-based posts of up to 140 characters that are displayed on the user’s profile page. Most people now send and receive their Tweets from a mobile phone. About 200 million people use Twitter today and send 350 million Tweets a day.

Coaches and athletic directors can use Twitter to notify team members and families about changes to practice and game schedules as well as providing game results. Each Twitter user has followers and people he or she follows.

Like Facebook, your Twitter profile can be linked to other social media. Re-tweeting is one of the most helpful ways that Twitter can be used to effectively distribute a message. It is like a super-charged telephone tree. When someone re-tweets a message, a whole new group of people will get the message that was initially sent to just the followers. Twitter is an effective way to distribute a message as well as staying on top of news.

The downside of Twitter is that people Tweet before they think. Unfortunately, there are very few privacy controls on Twitter. You can lock your Tweets to only approved followers, but most people do not do that.

The whole idea of Twitter is to get your message out, distribute information, promote school events or share something you know your followers will find interesting; however, personal opinions should be avoided. You can also find the occasional unsavory character following you, so you need to monitor who is following you and dump anyone whose real goal is to try and promote his or her services.

**Blogging**

Blog is short for weblog and it is a way to keep an online journal. Posting daily or weekly is a great way to get stakeholders to check in on what is going on in your program. Posts can vary in length from a few words to several thousand. However, most bloggers know that posts longer than 300 words are not read as much.

Athletic directors should focus posts on the results and procedures involved in the school’s athletic program. Blogs are a great way to promote your department, what you are doing and why you are doing it. Blogs are also a great way to be creative. You can add pictures and video to your posts. Don’t be surprised if you end up with several hundred people following your blog each week.

The best thing about the blog is that you have complete control over the message. The worst thing about the blog is you have complete control over the message. Making sure you are expressing yourself accurately, especially when a complicated issue is involved, is very important.

It is important to remember that you have time to revise initial drafts several times and to sleep on tricky posts before you publish them. Also, keep the tone of your blog positive and avoid criticizing others. You cannot take it back once you have hit “Publish This.”

The two main blogging options are Blogger, which is a Google product, and WordPress. There are others – some with a monthly fee – that can add extra bells and whistles. As with Facebook and Twitter, you can link your Blog with other social media platforms.

Many athletic directors may be a bit fearful about diving into social media. One suggestion is to start small with Twitter and a weekly Tweet from the athletic department. You will be surprised at the positive reaction you will receive. A large part of an athletic director’s job is to solve problems for members of the community. These social media options allow more contact with the entire community – people who are happy as well as upset.

Athletic directors are leaders within schools and can use social media to stay in touch with the people with whom they work and to help create programs that will make the athletes and community proud.

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