

NASA's Current Strategies

Currently, NASA operates over a wide variety of social media, including but not limited to networks like Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, and Instagram. Trendy photos like “Pluto’s Love Note”, a snapshot captured from the New Horizons spacecraft which highlights a heart-shaped discoloration on the dwarf planet, have been instrumental to gaining the agency social media followers and furthering their online presence. Other events—like holding live “AMA” (Ask Me Anything) sessions with science teams on the popular forum platform Reddit—have also gained the agency leaps and bounds of recognition among the digital population.

But theirs is a tricky line to walk: because NASA is a government agency, their use of social media—while exceptionally apt for reaching the generational cohort they desperately need to connect with if they have any hope of future support—must also be done in such a way that it is careful not to show favoritism towards a single private company (Stockton, 2015). If the love letter from Pluto had been released on all of their social media platforms, its lack of exclusivity likely would have diminished its impact, but if the platform it was released on required membership in order to view the image, NASA would have been inadvertently generating revenue for the company via ad exposure. Thus far, all of its social media use has been within the public domain and strategically implemented so as to not show favoritism over one platform or the other, but it remains a precarious balance for the agency which may prove unsustainable in the future.

The strategy in and of itself is excellent, but not well-rounded. While promoting NASA’s brand and making its name more common in daily use, it’s also a double-edged sword. Because although it popularizes the agency, it does nothing to further the educational awareness of the agency’s goals and missions, reducing the profound nature of its work to the character limit of

social media platforms. In an effort to connect with the digital generation, NASA's intellectual prestige is lessened, making them trendy rather than inspiring. The snapshot of Pluto may have gained the agency 300,000 more followers (Stockton, 2015), but of those, how many will glean education from being exposed to NASA's feed? I propose that it's akin to an artfully designed journal skin: while it's captivating to look at, the case remains that the content within is still empty. A brand image without the weight of the organization's vision or mission will not effectively earn NASA the long term constituents it will need to continue its work on or off this planet.

Action Plan

How then do we balance the sensationalist nature of social media with the anchors of education? As stated earlier, Generation Y can be viewed as an out-group from NASA's general constituency. In order to increase an out-group members' involvement in the community, there are a number of guides and strategies available. Northouse (2015) suggests first and foremost listening. In an ISD perspective, this would be the analysis stage in which we gather information from the learners about what they feel is most important to learn. A potential first step for NASA's social media could be to pose the question or poll, "What would you most like to learn about NASA's work?" From there, select the top three answers and begin designing infographics that are equal parts exciting as they are educational. This also serves the function of helping the out-group members feel included, another strategic move that Northouse highly recommends for those wishing to convert out-group members to in-group facilitators.

Building on the platform of community involvement, the next step NASA could take would be to hold contests which unify the creative minds that often congregate on social media. Instagram is well known for its artistic community, but each network has its own niche of

talented individuals, and because NASA cannot pander to one community alone, the contests would have to be available to all of its social media followers. This can be an advantage, however: by splitting the categories up among different networks (i.e., having different entries for different networks with no respect to hierarchy), NASA can both create a special relationship with its social media users and diversify its educational media by having its target audience directly participate in its creation. Out-group members want, above all, to feel included and have their unique contributions recognized (Northouse, 2015), while social media directors want to keep their staff under budget and clocking as little overtime as possible—thus it's a win-win for both sides of the relationship. While the promotional activities itself will clock billable hours, the dividends will be a stronger relationship with its social media followers, a direct view into the educational material and approach that the followers want to see, and out-group members who feel empowered within the NASA community despite not necessarily having any scientific background themselves.

Although this suggested campaign is simple in strategy, it is not simple in scope. NASA links a total of 14 major social networks from its main website, but the data, the graphic media, and the community strength that could be drawn from the successful conclusion of the campaign could yield rewards which extend well beyond the short term costs of the project. If you want to impress the gravity of your goals to your constituents, let them take an active part in telling your story, play an integral role in fulfilling your mission. When they're engaged as active participants rather than passive followers, they cease to be out-group members and start to be part of the community itself.

A community which will be a necessary backbone as the economy rises and falls, as life cycles change and political pandemonium ensues. If NASA wants to continue its noble but lofty

goals of exploring the stars and beyond, it needs salt of the earth of the support, and that translates to taxpayer funding. So the time is now, not tomorrow, to get Generation Y involved in the conversation. Stop showing them picture books and start writing stories together instead.

Conclusion

If a potential solution to enriching NASA's social media use with education is so simple, why hasn't NASA implemented it? I believe this may owe to in-group and out group dichotomies, education and marketing biases. It is the nature of the in-group to look outward and assume that others are looking in, but rarely the case that they place themselves in the position of the out-group and take the journey with them collaboratively. Likewise, educators often focus on the content of a message rather than its presentation, while marketing is geared for the display rather than the structure—and although I stated my obvious bias for education earlier, neither is complete without the other. To return to my earlier comparison of a decorated journal without filled pages, a book rich in information without headers would be just nearly as pointless to own (except, perhaps, to impress people who visit and ask about it). It's the marriage of diverse thought which breeds simple and effective solutions—when two sides which are normally juxtaposed at the end of a spectrum combine their leadership strengths, you can devise cost-effective, enriching experiences for everyone involved, and if you're lucky, maybe get humanity that much closer to the cosmos in the process.

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