

DIG Final Exam

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Social Media Strategy

We live in a world dominated by constant connectivity. Through the power of digital networks, we have created a myriad of ways to stay connected with friends, family, and strangers alike. There is no better example of this than social media.

What Drives People to Communicate?

According to recent data, more than 80% of the world's population currently has some kind of social media presence (Dean, 2024). People are innately urged to communicate with each other. Studies have shown that people communicate for many reasons, including impression management, information acquisition, social bonding, and persuasion (Berger, 2014, p. 589). Brands that leverage this inherent compulsion to communicate and use it to their advantage have found incredible success. Whether using ads, content, or influencers, most companies have found social media to be an effective means of connecting with their audience.

Social Networks

Social media marketing is not just the domain of big, powerful, commercial brands such as Coca-Cola or Apple, however. Firms of all sizes have found great success in leveraging social media to build awareness and eventually convert prospects into customers. Not only have studies shown that people tend to acquire information through relatively weak ties like those found on social media (Godes & Mayzlin, 2009, p. 737), but that people actually use the information acquired online to make decisions in the real world (Godes & Mayzlin, Using Online Conversations to Study Word-of-Mouth Communication, 2004, p. 558). Due to its success and ubiquity, a well-planned social media strategy is not just nice to have but a requirement for all brands in today's marketplace, including universities.

Influencer Marketing

To attract and convert potential candidates to its Online MBA Program (OMBA), the University of Southern California needs to develop a comprehensive social media strategy. This will allow them to attract desirable candidates and expand the program.

In the modern realm of social media, everyone is an influencer. There are many types of influencers and roles they can play, such as content creator, endorser, filter, or fanatic (Avery & Israeli, 2020). I suggest we focus on influencers at several levels, closely tied to the OMBA program to fill these roles. This means using people within the university, current students, and alumni to serve as social media influencers. Using peripheral processing theories as a guide, we can use favorable interactions with current students to drive social proof, highly regarded alumni that prospective students can identify with, and affect transfer theories to build positive emotional connections to the university and program.

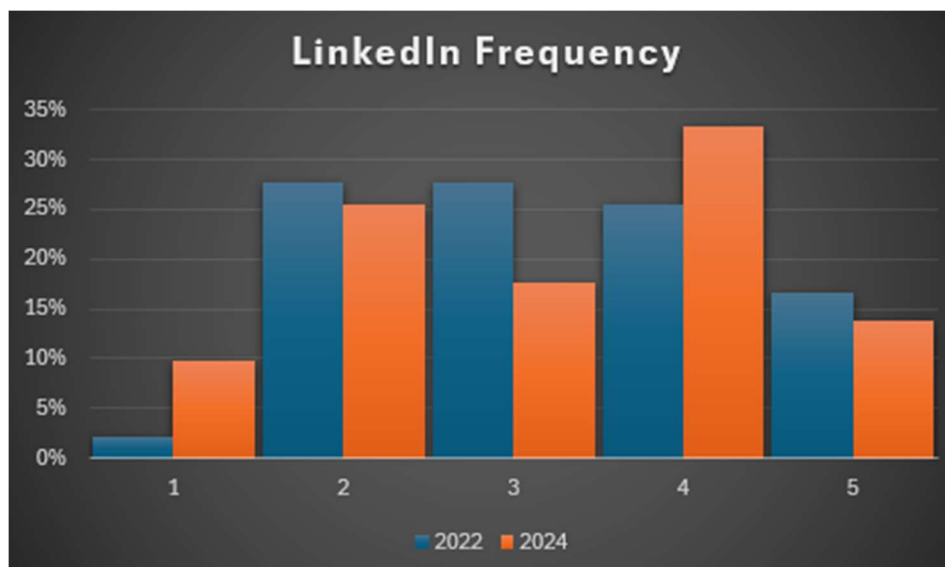
The Trojan network, or active alumni community at USC, works through reciprocation. As such, I do not believe that compensation will be necessary to encourage current students and alumni to participate. There should be more than enough people willing to participate simply because it is the right thing to do. The only direct expense will be in the administration of the social media programs and the costs of creating and distributing content, as outlined below.

LinkedIn

With more than 1 billion users across more than 200 countries, LinkedIn is the world's largest social network for professionals (LinkedIn, 2024). This is the preferred platform to not just connect with other professionals, but for job seekers to connect with potential employers. These attributes make it a great starting point for the OMBA program's social media strategy.

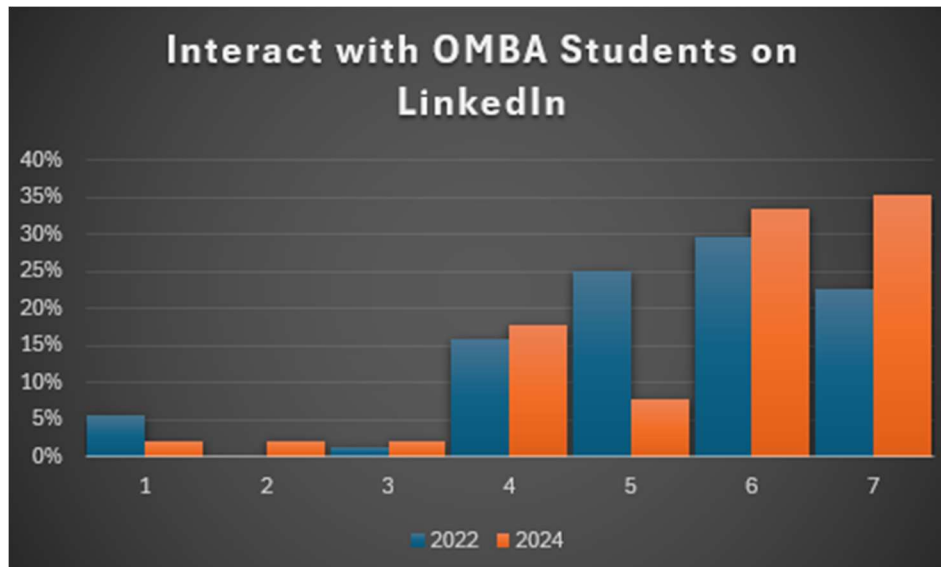
Listen

According to survey data collected from previous and current OMBA students, LinkedIn is their most frequently used social media platform. The average score across both cohorts was a 3.27, which indicates that on average, students engage with the platform every few days.

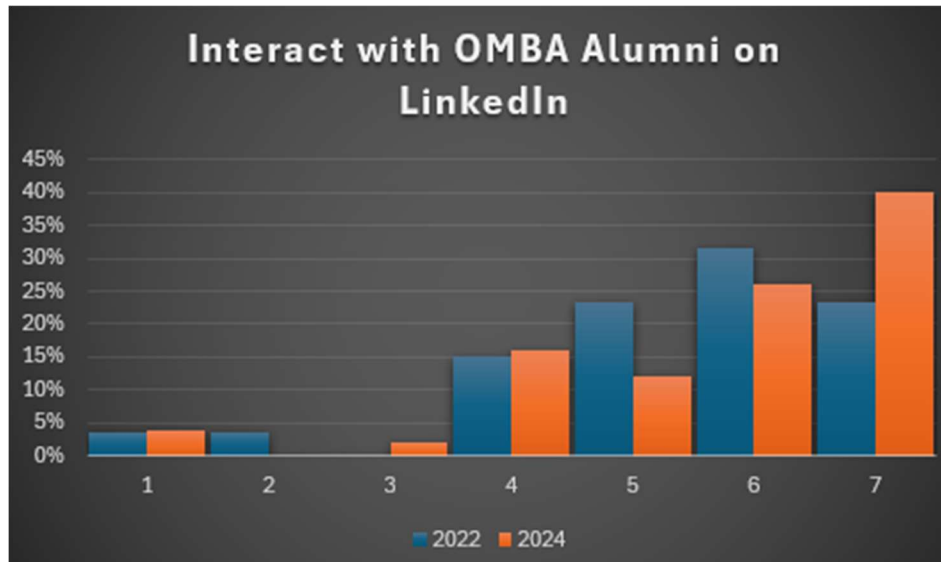


Both cohorts showed a strong affinity for LinkedIn, with the 2024 cohort increasing in frequency.

Additionally, students showed a strong affinity for the desire to interact with both current OMBA students and alumni via the LinkedIn platform.



Both cohorts showed a strong affinity for connecting with current OMBA students on LinkedIn.



Both cohorts showed a strong affinity for connecting with OMBA alumni on LinkedIn.

Engage

There are five levels through which the university should interact with the LinkedIn platform, each with their own targeting and content strategy. This includes the university, the Marshall School of Business, the OMBA program, current students, and OMBA alumni.

The strategy at the university, school, and program level should be aligned. Overall, their goal with these social media accounts should be to generate awareness of the OMBA program. Their targets at this level should be not just prospective students, but employers as well. Using professional quality posts and short-form videos, they should promote the benefits of the program. To students, they should tout the benefits of flexibility, curriculum, and reputation. For employers, they should focus on showcasing the quality of education and students produced by the program.

Current students should be encouraged to share their experiences with the OMBA program frequently through posts on the LinkedIn platform. By showcasing their experience while in the program, they will not only drive general awareness but give prospective students a candid look into life as an online MBA student. Content managers for all levels at the university should scan, monitor, and share content generated by current students.

The university should leverage its relationships with alumni to promote the program and testify to how it helped them achieve their career goals. This can be in the form of curated posts, or more likely, co-created short videos that include testimonials from graduates of the OMBA program.

Promote

A Customer Relationship Management Platform (CRM) should be used to monitor and manage the engagement of prospective students with all social media content. This will be a recurring theme throughout the remainder of this paper. If designed properly, the CRM should be capable of tracking interactions at every stage in the marketing funnel. At the Top of the Funnel (TOFU), data can be collected about user engagement and impressions. Ideally, a tracking pixel or cookie will be placed on the devices of users that interact with LinkedIn content, which can be used to follow them as they travel through the funnel. At the least, influencers within the student and alumni communities should be given tracking codes, which can be entered when an interested user indicates interest in the program, possibly by filling out a contact form. From this data, insights can be gained about which content results in the most interest and lower funnel activity.

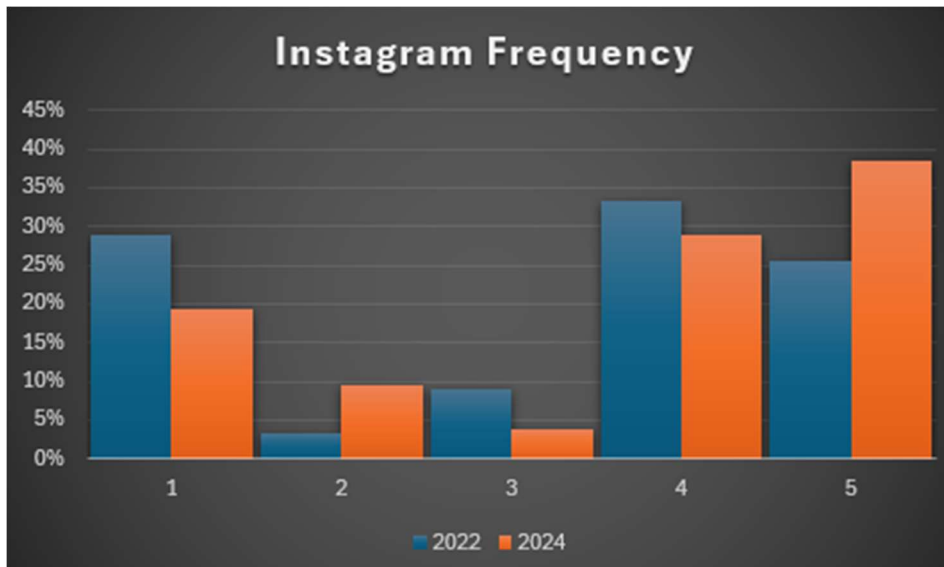
In the Middle of the Funnel (MOFU), prospective students that are in the consideration stage can be fed custom ads reminding them to take the next step (like apply) or even trigger a customized email message. Encouraging prospective students at this stage to take further action could even entail having them schedule a one-on-one conversation with an admissions counselor.

At the Bottom of the Funnel (BOFU), students that have applied but not yet committed to the program may be contacted directly by either an admissions counselor or student ambassador. Rather than waiting for a candidate to request a conversation, proactivity may help encourage them to reach a decision. Hearing a direct testimonial from a current student, and therefore an authoritative source, may help close this transaction.

Instagram

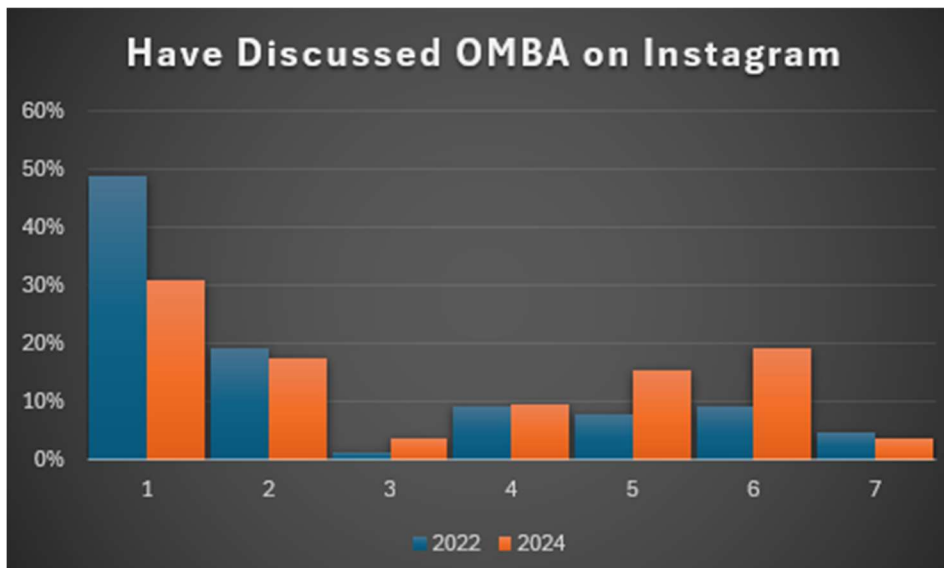
Listen

Worldwide, Instagram has more than 1.5 billion active users (Statista, 2023). Not only is it one of the most popular social media platforms in the world, but among OMBA students as well. According to survey data, it is the second most used social media platform by OMBA students with an average score of 3.23, indicating that most users engage with the platform every few days.

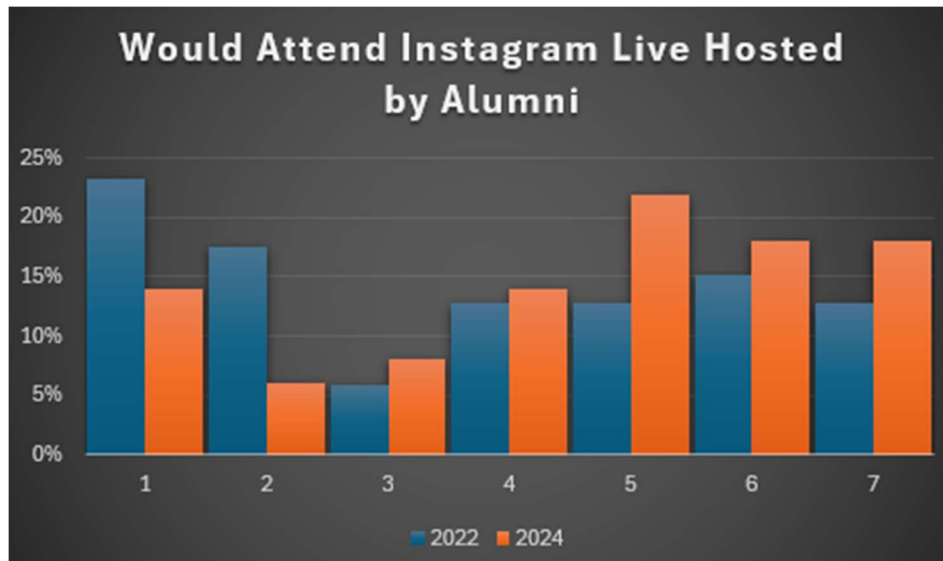


Both cohorts showed a high frequency of use for the Instagram platform.

Additionally, sentiments of OMBA students toward the Instagram platform appear to be changing. As compared to earlier cohorts, students surveyed in 2024 indicated that they had used Instagram to discuss the OMBA program; an increase of more than 32% versus prior cohorts. The current students also indicated that they would much prefer to attend an Instagram Live event with OMBA alumni; and increase of 21% versus previous cohorts.



Students from the 2024 cohort are more likely to discuss the OMBA program on Instagram.



Students from the 2024 cohort are more likely to attend an Instagram Live event hosted by OMBA alumni.

Engage

At the university and school level, their Instagram content strategies will be incredibly similar. The overall goal for both being to promote the program and drive general awareness. This can take the form of both posts and Instagram Reels, which are short-form videos. For these two levels, the content should be polished and professionally curated.

The OMBA program should use the Instagram platform to drive not just awareness, but deeper interest in the program. Their target audiences should be both students and employers. For students, their content should reflect the ease of flexibility of the OMBA program and the fact that it uses the same curriculum and professors as the on-campus programs. While some of this may translate into the content targeted toward employers, most of it should be used to tell success stories about graduates of the OMBA program. By showcasing students that have gone on to find great jobs at Apple or Microsoft, they can show both students and employers alike that the program produces high quality students and results in desirable outcomes.

Current students should be encouraged to share their experiences with the OMBA program through “Day in the Life” type posts and reels. Showcasing both the successes and challenges of an online MBA student will help lend both visibility and credibility to the program. This will give prospective students a sneak peak into the real life of current students and encourage engagement through one of the world’s most popular platforms.

Alumni should be encouraged to submit period success stories through the Instagram platform, which can be reposted by the official USC accounts. By showing prospective students, who may be in the consideration stage, that OMBA students go on to do great things, they cosign the program and can help proactively overcome objections about the validity of the program.

Promote

The closing strategies for Instagram and the remaining social media platforms do not vary much. Once a prospective student is in the pipeline and past the TOFU stage, the remaining

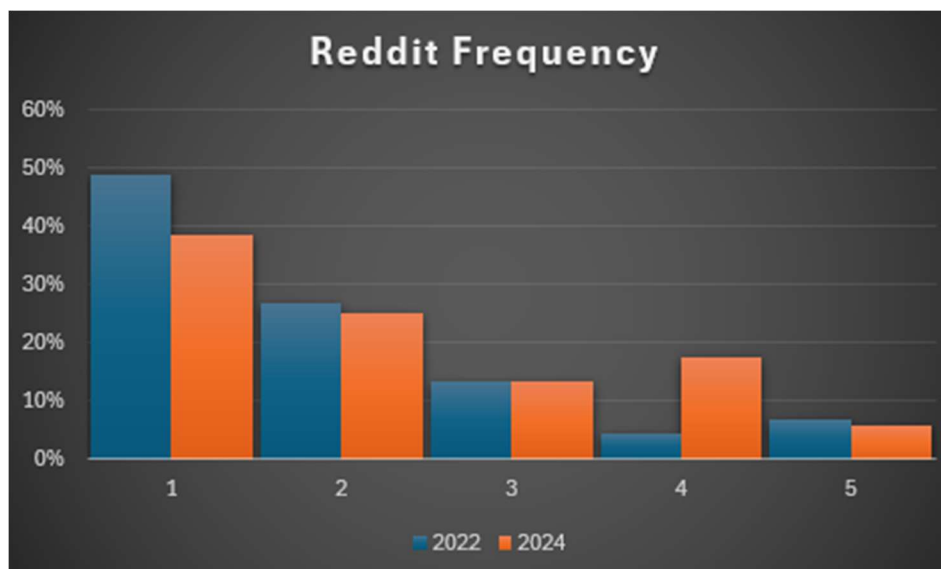
processes should be standardized. Due to this, I will not be going into as much detail as I did with LinkedIn for the remaining platforms.

Understanding where prospective students entered the marketing funnel is important. In this instance, those that first interacted with the program through Instagram may be more reachable through Instagram. Given this, in addition to the actions already prescribed for those in the MOFU or BOFU, it may be prudent to serve up additional, or more targeted, ads to those at these later stages.

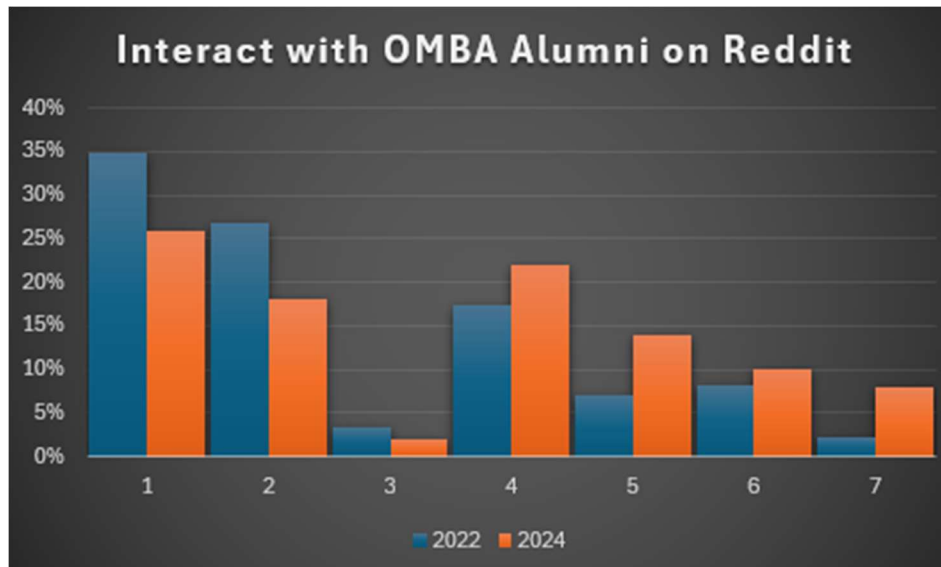
Reddit

Listen

Among the survey respondents, Reddit ranked 6 out of 7 in terms of use, with the average student stating that they never use the platform. So why would I suggest that the OMBA program utilize it as part of their social media strategy? Because sentiment is changing. Current students experienced an increase of more than 17% in Reddit usage versus prior cohorts. On top of that, 27% more students expressed that they would like the opportunity to interact with OMBA alumni on Reddit.



The 2024 cohort showed a 17% increase in their usage of Reddit.



The 2024 cohort expressed 27% more interest in interacting with OMBA alumni on Reddit.

Additionally, the goal of this social media strategy is to attract potential candidates to the program. This means meaning them where they are at, not strictly relying on data generated by current students. Reddit has more than 73 million daily active users (Dean, Reddit User and Growth Stats, 2024). The subreddits r/MBA and r/USC have 229k and 48k users, respectively (Reddit, 2024). A lot of people use the platform to talk about college and MBA programs.

Engage

The content generators for this platform will be much narrower than the others. I do not recommend that the university or school participate. Due to the personal and interactive nature of the platform, I recommend that only the OMBA program, current students, and alumni participate.

The OMBA program can participate through a moderated subreddit, run by the school. This subreddit can be used as a hub for prospective students, current students, and alumni to post and interact with each other. It should also be encouraged for both current students and alumni to participate in the Ask Me Anything (AMA) process that Reddit is famous for. Allowing prospective students to interact with these parties in real time can help build affinity for the program.

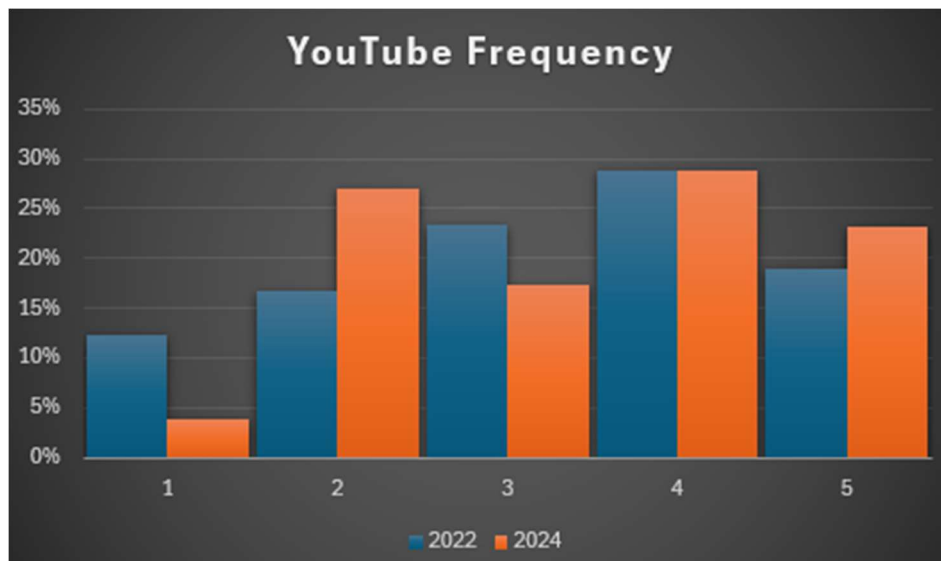
Promote

Prospective students in the MOFU and BOFU that were brought in from the Reddit platform will be treated like all others. No special handling should be necessary once a prospect is already in the pipeline.

YouTube

Listen

Although YouTube is the second most popular social media platform according to survey data, I think it has the least potential for social media marketing to prospective students. The average student surveyed engaged with the platform every few days, which is good from the perspective of frequency. However, a large portion of traffic is driven by their long-form content and one-way engagement. Yes, users can leave comments, but this is hardly interactive when compared to the types of interactions that can be had through other social media platforms. Due to this, I recommend that the university take advantage of its large audience for awareness campaigns, but not much else.



Both cohorts engage with the YouTube platform every few days on average.

Engage

At the university, school, and program level, professional quality advertisements should be run on the YouTube platform. These should be targeted at those that best fit the demographic and psychographic profile of the ideal OMBA student (more specifics on this later). Over the years, I have seen plenty of ads like these from schools such as Syracuse, Grand Canyon University, and Southern New Hampshire University. All of them run very similar, short ads targeted at working adults that want to continue their education or aspire to do more. While not incredibly effective at conversion, they are a great way to drive broad awareness and could do so for the OMBA program. Given the relatively high cost of running ads on YouTube, I would use these sparingly.

Promote

Prospective students in the MOFU and BOFU that were brought in from the YouTube platform will be treated like all others. No special handling should be necessary once a prospect is already in the pipeline.

Measuring the Effects of Social Media Strategy

As stated above, the social media strategy detailed in this paper is based mostly on data collected by informal surveys conducted on current OMBA students during the 2022 and 2024 school years. In reality, data collected from many disparate sources should be collected and analyzed before making solid recommendations. The limited time series data generated from these surveys can only generate limited insights but can be useful for providing directional guidance.

The types of data used in an analysis like this could vary from platform to platform. A good place to start would be by collecting as much demographic data as possible on past and current OMBA students. Analyzing this data via cluster analysis could help reveal insights into common traits shared by the ideal OMBA candidate. Insights revealed from this analysis could be a target age range, which locations yield the most students, occupations, income levels, and even more. This data can then be used to create profiles and personas for various OMBA students, which can then be used for segmentation, targeting, and positioning.

Social media platforms themselves generate large amounts of data that insights can be gleaned from. Instagram has likes. LinkedIn has reposts. Reddit has upvotes. All of these can be used as indicators of engagement. Not only could analyzing the various data elements gleaned from social media platforms help provide direction prior to any marketing campaigns but can provide insights along the way as well. A great example of this would be the use of sentiment analysis. This means using artificial intelligence (AI) or machine learning to determine whether certain interactions were positive or negative. By scanning and measuring the quantity and velocity of various types of sentiment, the university can monitor the way people perceive and talk about the OMBA program.

As mentioned previously, ideally, all of these marketing campaigns would be monitored by a CRM system of some kind. These systems are capable of collecting, aggregating, and reporting on data for prospects at all stages of the marketing funnel. Not only can this data be used to take action on those currently in the funnel, but it can provide insights into how best to convert prospects into sales. Just as much information can be gained from those that abandon the process as those that complete it. By retroactively analyzing previous interactions and determining which actions or behaviors signal a prospect leaving the funnel, actions can be taken to counteract this. Perhaps further analysis finds that most prospects leave the funnel after they have received no touches in two weeks. This implies that prospects require more frequent contact, and the marketing strategy can be adjusted accordingly.

Additionally, data, such as that found in a CRM system, can be transformed into key performance indicators (KPIs), which can be used to measure performance. Examples of KPIs for this particular strategy could be the quantity of referrals from current students and alumni. The percentage of these referrals that are converted and closed. The quantity of impressions from not just a particular platform, but specific campaigns. The probability of conversion, given certain factors. The cost of these conversions. With additional data, you could even compute the normalized program revenue per student, the average acquisition cost, or customer lifetime value. The possibilities for using data in this context are near endless and require constant experimentation. It is through this process of iteration, experimentation, and analysis that better campaigns can be formed, and better outcomes driven.

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Appendix

Low Affinity

Q1_6 1.49 Please indicate how frequently (if at all) you use the platforms below - Snapchat

High Affinity

The questions pertain to your MBA program search - It was important for me to hear from alumni

Q4_3 5.31

Q5_4 5.59 I wish that I had more opportunities to converse with Marshall OMBA alumni

Q5_5 5.53 I wish that I had more opportunities to converse with Marshall OMBA students

Q6_1 5.78 I would attend an interactive Zoom event hosted by Marshall OMBA students

Q6_3 5.34 I would attend an in-person event where I could interact with Marshall OMBA students
I would like to have more opportunities to interact with Marshall OMBA students on

Q6_4 5.51 LinkedIn

Q7_1 5.95 I would attend an interactive Zoom event hosted by Marshall OMBA alumni

Q7_3 5.48 I would attend an in-person event where I could interact with Marshall OMBA alumni
I would like to have more opportunities to interact with Marshall OMBA alumni on

Q7_4 5.54 LinkedIn

Q8_6 5.70 I would be willing to engage with prospective students one-on-one

Social Networks

Rank	Score	Network
1	3.27	LinkedIn
2	3.26	YouTube
3	3.23	Instagram
4	2.36	Facebook
5	2.03	Twitter
6	1.93	Reddit
7	1.36	Snapchat

YOY Changes

The questions pertain to your MBA program search - I looked for information on MBA programs on social media platforms

Q4_1 20.9%

I would attend an Instagram Live event where I could interact with Marshall OMBA alumni

Q7_2 21.3%

I would like to have more opportunities to interact with Marshall OMBA alumni on

Q7_7 27.3% Redddit

Q8_3 32.0% I have discussed Marshall OMBA on Instagram

