An Alumni Futures White Paper

Alumni Organization Twitter Profiles: A Quick Guide to 10 Best Practices

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alumni futures

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By Andrew Shaindlin
December 2010

Introduction

Twitter, the popular "microblogging" service, was said to have 175 million users worldwide, as of October 31, 2010. The system allows its users to publish short status updates. Users can also read updates from others on the Internet (sometimes with embedded web links). These updates, called "tweets," are limited in length to a combined total of 140 characters – i.e., letters, numbers, and spaces.

Individuals are not the only ones using the service. Organizations, including private companies and non-profits, have accounts on the system, and use them for a variety of purposes. As one would expect, alumni organizations are increasingly active on Twitter, and Alumni Futures maintains **a list of alumni organizations** using Twitter:

> Alumni Organizations on Twitter

Anyone using Twitter can "follow" this list, and people not using Twitter can still read the tweets by subscribing to this "newspaper" version of the same information:

> http://paper.li/alumnifutures/alumni-orgs

Readers can use it to see what alumni associations and alumni relations programs are sending out to the Twitterverse (the list format saves the reader from having to follow them all individually).

For businesses and individuals alike, the basic building block of Twitter activity is the **user profile**. Why is the profile important?

Contents:

Why Twitter Profiles Matter

The profile allows the account holder to publish:

the account name,
a "real name,"
a profile photo,
biographical information,
account location, and
a relevant URL.

The account name is required, but the other content is optional.

The account profile is just one component of an overall presence on Twitter, but it is an important building block for success. There are at least two reasons for this:

1. A complete and carefully planned profile **can help people find an organization** on Twitter through search and referrals, and
2. A profile's tone and content can **reflect the organization's identity and appeal to its target audience**.

An informal survey conducted in November 2010 provides information about how 150 alumni organizations set up their profiles on Twitter.

The survey gathered answers to questions about **ten characteristics** of the Twitter profile. After a quick look at the survey results, we present **10 Best Practices**, beginning on page 7.

Survey Results

Is the word "alumni" in the Twitter account name?

89% of the accounts reviewed have some version of the word "alumni" in the name of the account (e.g., @caltechalumni, @ScrippsAlumnae, or @FresnoStateAlum).

"The account profile is just one component of an overall presence on Twitter, but it is an important building block for success."

Is the institution's name part of the Twitter account name?

50% of alumni organization accounts surveyed used an acronym or an abbreviation (such as @ASU_Alumni or @UNTAlumniAssoc). 34% used the school's fully identifiable name (@EmoryAlumni and @AquinasAlumni for example). 13% used a nickname (@MizzouAlumni, @KStateAlumni).
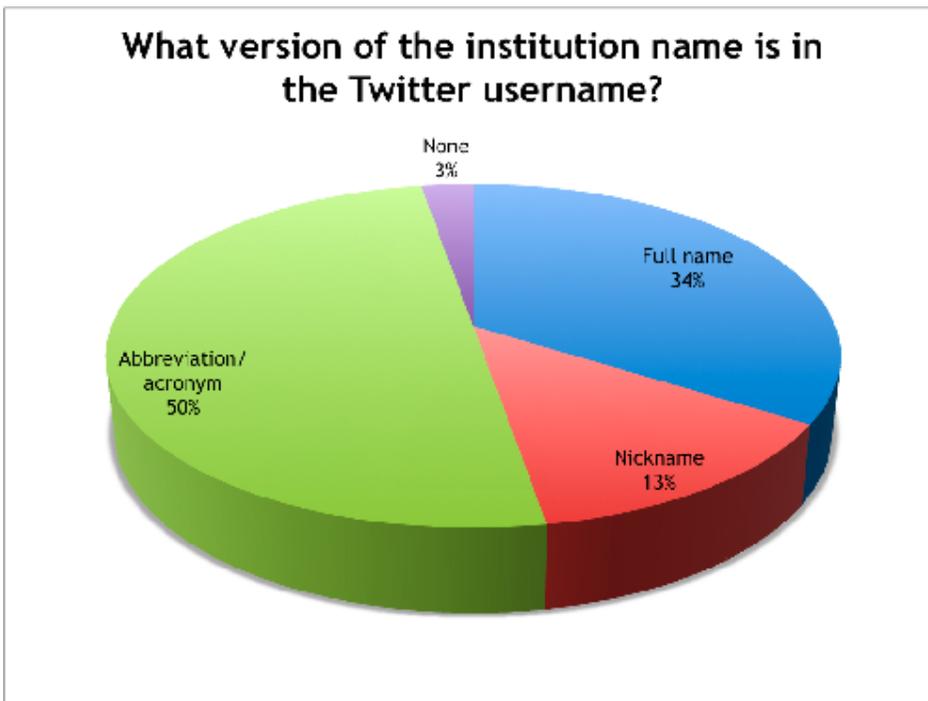
What appears as the "real name"?

For an organization, it may not be obvious what to list as "first" and "last" name. 51% include both the word "alumni" *and* the parent institution's name or nickname (e.g., "Penn Alumni," or "Appalachian Alumni"). 44% used an acronym, initials, or abbreviation that might be identifiable by alumni ("SAS Alumni," "CUSSW Alumni"). 5% listed the school's name only, without using the word "alumni" at all.

Does the account profile include a picture?

149 of the 150 profiles reviewed (99.3%) included some kind of picture in the account profile. The sole organization that did not have a profile picture was a public university business school in

the United States. Their Twitter account was used just twice, in 2008, and has been dormant since then.

What does the profile picture show?

41% of alumni program profile pictures showed the alumni organization's logo or symbol. Sometimes this is simply the name of the institution with the word "alumni" or the phrase "alumni association" added. Other organizations have their own logos that are based on the parent institution's identity, or on some other characteristic that alumni will associate with the school.

17% of alumni association profile pictures showed the logo or word mark of the parent institution, and 12% each showed either a campus photo (most often depicting a well-known building or other architectural feature), or an athletics-related image (such as a costumed mascot). Photographs showing actual people, either as individuals or in a group, appeared in just 4 of the 149 profile pictures present (2.7%).
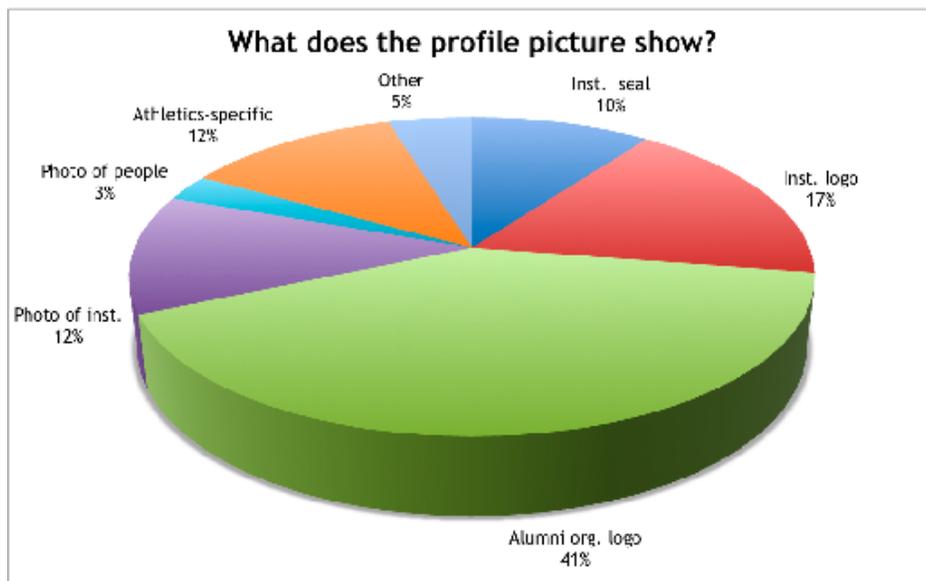
Does the account include biographical information?

Twitter lets each account holder write a 160-character self-description. 92% of the alumni program Twitter profiles reviewed took advantage of this opportunity to say something about themselves.

What organizations or people does the bio mention?

67% of accounts mention the parent institution's name, and many specify the institution name and/or the alumni organization or office name as well (62%). Only about 8% mention the name of the individual(s) writing the tweets, which creates a kind of hybrid individual/organizational identity. A combined total of 12% mentioned something like the mascot or team name ("Go Devils!"), or specifically mentioned "friends" or "supporters" as a group – going beyond the alumni audience.

Does the bio say the account is "official"?

18% of profiles explicitly claimed "official" status, suggesting strong awareness that individuals other than staff members can - and do - create Twitter accounts using the name and image of the school or its community.

"...individuals other than staff members can - and do - create Twitter accounts using the name and image of the school or its community."

Does bio language actively encourage alumni engagement?

27% of the account bios reviewed included at least one word from a specified list of alumni engagement-related terms. These words represent a call to action, encouraging alumni to alumni interaction. Among these words are:

- engage
- share
- connect
- network
- participate
- interact

Where does the bio link to?

Twitter lets account holders add a link to their profile, driving traffic to a specified web site. 93% of the organizations reviewed included a URL. Of the 140 schools with a URL in their bio, 92% sent the user to the alumni organization's own web site, while 4% sent them to the school's homepage. Two sent their users to the association's Facebook Page, and one to a campus blog.

The following section provides best practice recommendations for alumni organizations using Twitter. The goal is to maximize alumni interaction and engagement.

10 Best Practices for Alumni Organization Twitter Profiles

1. Choose a profile picture that promotes the organization's identity, the place it represents, or its people

Twitter in general exhibits a strong individual component, and the majority of accounts are personal ones representing a single person. While associations or alumni offices are obviously organizations, they are organizations made up of people who serve other people in turn. There is no "right" way to project one's image, but a logo or word mark sends an organizational message:

An image of a campus landmark may engender nostalgia and a strong sense of place, which alumni organizations have long used to reconnect their members with alma mater:

Images of people can humanize the organization for its Twitter audience, but showing more than one person in the image is a challenge. The Twitter profile picture is very small: 48 x 48 pixels. On a laptop screen the Twitter profile picture is half an inch wide - smaller than a postage stamp. Images showing

groups of people are difficult to understand at this scale. Lewis University's alumni account (@LewisUAlumni) shows a single person, who is easily visible even at the small image size in Twitter:

Lewis University

@LewisUAlumni Romeoville

Welcome to the Lewis University Alumni & Friends Twitter Profile. @lewisualumni

http://www.alumni.lewisu.edu

The survey revealed a few creative uses of the profile picture. For example, Emory University (@EmoryAlumni) personifies its account with an image of a well-known campus mascot, named Dooley:

Emory Alumni

@EmoryAlumni ÜT: 33.820446,-84.301442

The Emory Alumni Association - keeping Emory alumni in the loop since 1895. Get Informed. Get Involved. Get Connected. Click the link!

https://www.alumni.emory.edu/portal/main_menu.html

This character, which appears at the University periodically as a skeleton dressed in black, is immediately recognizable to Emory alumni as a campus tradition stretching back more than 100 years. The Dooley tradition is unknown to outsiders, so this symbol has an additional affinity-building effect among Emory alumni who see it. They know that others will not "get" the insiders' reference to the University tradition, and this binds them more closely with those who do.

Western Kentucky (@WKUalumni) uses a photo of a class ring. This connotes alumni status, promotes a campus tradition, and stands apart from the logos, mascots, heraldic crests, and architectural themes seen elsewhere.

WKU Alumni Assoc.
@WKUAlumni Bowling Green, KY
The official twitter feed for the Western Kentucky University Alumni Association
http://alumni.wku.edu

2. Avoid including small text in your profile picture

Text-based logos and word marks are common in alumni relations, and many Twitter profile pictures include words that are too small to read. As mentioned in an Alumni Futures article in 2008, LinkedIn Group logos suffer from the same problem (http://www.alumnifutures.com/2008/09/alumni-groups-a.html).

As shown above, the Twitter profile picture generally appears with a width of 0.5 inches (and rarely more than 0.67 inches). The words on the following images, shown here the same size they appear on Twitter, are unreadable:

These images have words or acronyms that are legible, even at the small size in Twitter:

3. Say who you are, but also say what you do

The bio field, which allows for a 160-character description of the organization, or some other message, took on a binary

quality across the profiles surveyed. Generally, an organization *either* said 1) who they are ("Official Twitter account of the Mercyhurst College of Alumni Relations"), *or* they said 2) what they do ("connect alumni...").

A very small number of account bios do *both* these things in the space allotted, but it is possible and desirable to do so. For example, @StanfordAlumni's bio uses the full 160-character allotment to say:


Stanford Alumni
@StanfordAlumni Stanford, California
We're the official Stanford Alumni Twitter account, and we're all about YOU. We'll help you connect with other alums who tweet & we'll retweet you too. Welcome!
http://alumni.stanford.edu

As seen above in the "Dooley" example from Emory University, a Twitter profile can employ unique traditions to tie alumni to the institution. The use of nicknames and campus slang can have the same effect. This is most often seen on Twitter when alumni organizations refer to alumni by a group nickname, such as Reedies (Reed College, pictured below), Techers (Caltech), or Mudders (Harvey Mudd College).
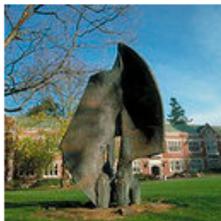
Reed Alumni Office
@reed_alumni Portland, Oregon
news and events for Reedies around the globe; managed by Robin Tovey '97
http://www.reed.edu/alumni

Another common practice is to refer to alumni by some version of the mascot's name (see Purdue University, below), or to include "friends" or "supporters."

Purdue Alumni

@PurdueAlumni West Lafayette, IN

PurdueAlumni on twitter lets you follow happenings of Purdue alums and connect with other Boilers. We follow and retweet alums! Let us know if that is you.

http://www.purduealum.org

Approximately 8% of the profiles reviewed used the alumni organization's mission statement as their bio. While the organization's profile may seem a logical place to include such information, it tends to formalize the organization's identity, which can have a chilling effect in the informal and conversational world of Twitter. Furthermore, to be blunt, the vast majority of alumni probably don't have much interest in reading official mission statements. They simply want to connect with other alumni and the institution.

In most cases, an alumni association mission statement is less about what the organization actually does than it is about what the organization wishes, hopes or tries to do. It is better to describe the form of interaction among alumni (as in Stanford's example) than to describe the *abstract ideals* of interaction.

"[Alumni] simply want to connect with other alumni and the institution."

4. Include a URL in the profile

While very few organizations omitted a link from their profile, one that did was a major U.S. business school and another was an internationally renowned, large private research university. **Links are free and may drive traffic to a destination that the alumni organization wants its audience to visit.**

Among those who linked someplace other than the organization's main page or online community, Boston University (@BUAlumni) and Aquinas College (@AquinasAlumni) both linked to their alumni organization's Facebook page. Scripps College (@ScrippsAlumnae) linked to the College reunion page of the alumnae web site, and their bio describes the account as the "Official Scripps Reunion twitter account!"

One organization, Centre College (@CentreAlumni), sent its Twitter followers to a blog. The Flame Run (http://www. theflamerun.com) is staff-written, but has a lighter, more informal tone than most official alumni sites, and therefore is more in keeping with the user-generated, conversational, interactive quality of Twitter.

5. Reach out beyond the alumni audience

For a variety of reasons, **an alumni organization's Twitter feed may be of interest to more than just the school's alumni.** Graduate students, post-doctoral scholars on campus, parents of current students, instructors, staff members, and local community members may want to keep track of the association's activity on Twitter. It is worth including the more likely of these constituencies by name in your bio.

For example, Slippery Rock University (@RockAlumni) is one of the very few in this survey that specifically reaches out to students to follow the Twitter feed.

Slippery Rock Univ
@RockAlumni Slippery Rock, PA
Open to all students and alumni of Slippery Rock University.
http://rockalumnicafe.com

6. In general, minimize the use of abbreviations for the institution's name

This survey established beyond doubt that there are many US institutions with the initials "ASU." Arizona State, Austin State, Augusta State, Appalachian State, Albany State… All of them use the abbreviated form of their name somewhere in their profile. Search results for "ASU" will not necessarily lead alumni to the ASU they are seeking. For this reason, **institutions with common acronyms or abbreviations should spell out the Institution's full name** in the Twitter account name, in the real name field, or in the biographical information.

An exception to this general rule is the case where the abbreviated format is also a well-known and identifiable institutional nickname (e.g., MIT, NYU, or UCLA).

7. Include a hashtag for your institution, and use it

Alabama A&M University (@aamualumnitweet) lists a hashtag for the school's name, #AAMU, and encourages followers to use it. This is unique among profiles in our survey:

AAMU Alumni/Friends
@AAMUAlumniTweet Normal, AL
Alabama A&M University Alumni and Friends. Our hash-tag is #AAMU.
http://www.alumniforaamu.com

"...having [a hashtag] for the institution would help its community managers track brand mentions more easily."

A hashtag is a string of characters included in the text of a tweet, and preceded by the # symbol. This makes it easily searchable, and hashtags are used within the Twitter community as a way to gather and quickly scan tweets on a specific topic. They are frequently used for meetings or conferences, but having one for the institution would help its community managers track brand mentions more easily.

8. Mention staff members' names as Twitter authors, and include their class year if they are alumni

Alumni organizations do not have the automatic advantage on social platforms of being identifiable individuals. This creates distance between their profiles (and associated content) and their audience. To relieve this formality, some associations identify the people behind the Twitter feed. This personalizes the account profile, and adds individuality to the organization's presence. It also creates some license for more personality to show through in the messages from that account.

McMaster University's alumni association profile (@McMasterAlumni) provides an intermediate stage of personalization by listing the *first* names of the Twitter account

authors. At the same time, they make the organization more accessible by including an email address in the bio (the only organization surveyed that did this).

McMaster University

@McMasterAlumni Hamilton, Ontario, Canada

McMaster Alumni Association twitter account. Updated by Kyle and Andrew at the Office of Alumni Advancement. Email: alumni@mcmaster.ca

http://alumni.mcmaster.ca

9. Include an email address in the profile

See McMaster University's profile as listed in number 8, above. No other surveyed profile included an email address. While it will use several of the allotted 160 characters, it provides a familiar, accessible contact method to followers who want to communicate directly with the organization.

Twitter does provide a "direct message" option, whereby two account holders can exchange messages that will not be seen by others, but one can only send a direct message (called a "DM" for short) to someone who is following the sender. If the alumni association doesn't follow its own alumni on Twitter (most do not), then the alumnus cannot send a direct message via Twitter. This is one reason an email address would be worth including.

Another reason is that it shows the organization is open to contact from its audience members.

10. Make full use of the profile's potential

When optimized, a successful Twitter profile will

- Convey information
- Appear familiar and inviting
- Drive engagement and interaction
- Amuse, inform, or inspire

Ohio University's Alumni Association (@OHIOAlumni)
offers a glimpse of campus, clear self-identification, a stated
purpose, the identity of a staff member behind the account, a
geographical location, and a web site address:

Ohio U. Alumni
@OHIOAlumni Athens, Ohio

*We're Ohio University's Alumni Association! Our goal is to
keep you connected to O.U. with news and relevant
events. Managed by OUAA staff member Yumi Choe.*
http://www.ohioalumni.org/

These are reasonable and worthy objectives for any
organization's profile and are easy to put in place.

Additional Resources

- Top 5 Ways Universities Can Use Twitter
  to Connect with Alumni:
  http://www.socialtimes.com/2010/11/top-5-ways-
  universities-can-use-twitter-to-connect-with-alumni/

- Alumni Associations on Twitter (a Twitter list):
  http://twitter.com/alumnifutures/alumni-orgs

- Alumni Associations on Twitter
  (same list, in "newspaper format"):
  http://paper.li/alumnifutures/alumni-orgs

- 10 Ways Universities are Engaging
  Alumni Using Social Media
  http://mashable.com/2009/07/23/alumni-social-media/

- Twitter-related content on Alumni Futures
  http://tinyurl.com/2agulak