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## An analysis of how public relations professionals use social media

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AN ANALYSIS OF HOW PUBLIC RELATIONS PROFESSIONALS USE SOCIAL MEDIA

A Thesis Submitted  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Designation  
University Honors with Distinction

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Entitled: An Analysis of How Public Relations Professionals Use Social Media

has been approved as meeting the thesis or project requirement for the Designation University Honors with Distinction.

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Date Honors Thesis Advisor

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Date Dr. Jessica Moon, Director, University Honors Program

## An Analysis of How Public Relations Professionals Use Social Media

### Introduction

Social media usage grew so quickly over the past few years that as of 2015, approximately 73 percent of Americans have a profile on at least one social media platform (Patel, 2015). Businesses have recognized the hidden potential of social media in interacting with their customers, but many still wrangle with understanding how to effectively put social media to use. Many social media managers are unsure of how to effectively use their businesses' social media platforms because they were never trained in this area of communication.

This thesis will provide a clear and concise guideline on how to grow a business's social media presence for public relations professionals in the workplace and individuals who run their business' social media accounts but who are not trained. Also, it will provide a deeper look into social media training areas where businesses might consider investing. This research will build understanding and knowledge about how to use social media effectively in a public relations career, and also show how public relations theories have adapted to this form of communication.

Periasamy, Freegard, Kumar, and Mittal (2011) provided insight into why companies should use social media in their advertising and marketing plans. They stated that there are three issues that are pushing consumers to social media sites for information on which products and services they should choose. "Customers' trust in what financial institutions say is

at an all-time low, buying behavior has changed so that the traditional advertising ‘product push’ is losing effectiveness, and finally, consumers are increasingly effective at filtering out marketing” (Periasamy et al., 2011, p. 5). Businesses now have to earn their consumers’ attention, and social media platforms are the new places to do so.

The purpose of this research was to provide a strong foundation on which to build effective social media practices from the interviews with public relations professionals. The combination of the interview results and the literature review will provide a credible and easy to understand guide for businesses to follow when running their social media accounts. By providing social media managers with clear guidelines of how to successfully build their business’s social media presence, they will be able to connect with new audiences and increase their customers’ trust thereby increasing their business’s profits.

### **Literature Review**

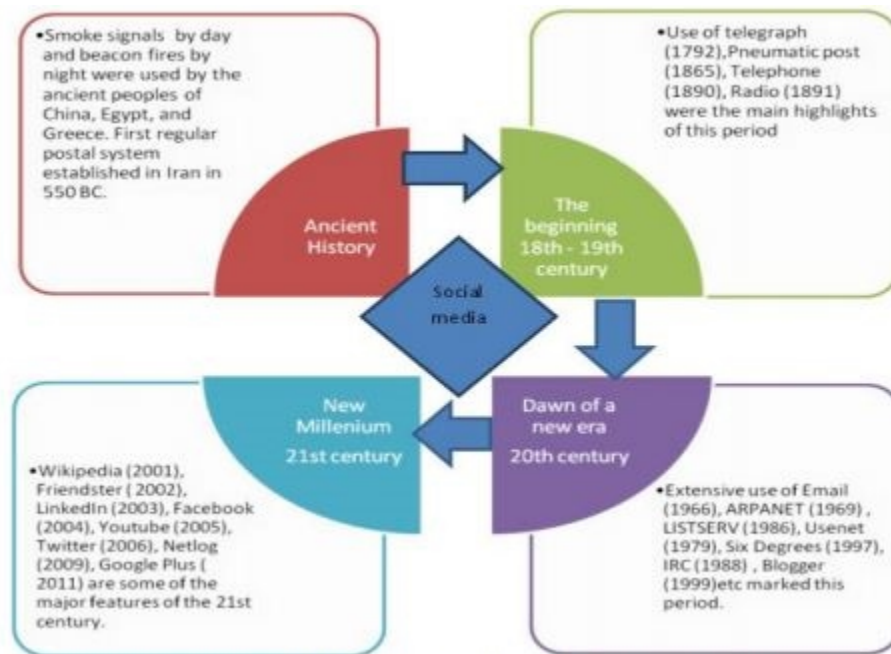
#### **Social Media Overview**

In order to fully understand the data found in this study, it is important to possess a firm grasp on the basics of social media. This section provides a brief overview of social media: its definition, history, usage, and some of the most used platforms as of 2016.

By definition, the phrase social media refers to, “Internet-based applications and websites that promote the sharing of user-generated content, communication, and participation on a large scale” (Cooper, 2015, p. 1). People have never stopped developing new ways to interact and communicate with one another. Figure 1 below shows the switch from

smoke signals to telegraphs to emails and all the way to the current social media platforms in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Baruah, 2012).

**Figure 1:** History of social media



Since the early 2000s, social media has changed the way people interact with each other. Twenty eight percent of time that individuals in the United States spend online involves social media platforms (Cooper, 2015). Currently, the most popular social media platforms are Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, and Instagram (Cooper, 2015). Over time, businesses have grown to view social media as a tool to communicate and create new opportunities to build relationships with their audiences (Schauppe & Belanger, 2014). According to Mount and Martinez (2014), "By 2011, approximately 83% of *Fortune* 500 companies were using some form of social media to connect with consumers" (p. 3). These sites allow for diverse audiences

to interact, share knowledge, and act creatively which - if used properly - is beneficial to the company (Mount & Martinez, 2014).

A quick overview of the top five social media platforms is necessary in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the data. Facebook, by definition, is used “To stay connected with friends and family, to discover what’s going on in the world, and to share and express what matters to them” (Facebook, 2016, n.p.). Individuals accomplish those tasks by posting “statuses”, pictures, and important information about their personal lives. If other individuals or businesses interest them with their posts, they will either go through the action of “liking” or becoming “friends” with those entities. In 2012, Facebook reported having over one billion active users (Facebook, 2012). On the other hand, Twitter is formatted in a drastically different way.

Twitter is a social media platform that individuals use to keep themselves updated on local and global news, the lives of interesting people, and to “Tweet” humorous thoughts and quotes from their own lives. In the fourth quarter of 2015, Twitter reported having 305 million active members (Statista, 2015). Individuals communicate on Twitter through the use of “Hashtags,” “Tweeting,” and by “Retweeting” posts which must all be 140 characters or less. The next logical step for social media is to incorporate videos, and that is exactly the purpose of YouTube.

YouTube “Provides a forum for people to connect, inform, and inspire others across the globe and acts as a distribution platform for original content creators and advertisers large and small” (YouTube, 2016, n.p.). As of 2016, YouTube had over one billion users (YouTube, 2016). This is all achieved through the use of videos, and it is used by everyone from celebrities to

students. While YouTube is the primary video platform, Instagram incorporates both high quality photos and small videos.

Instagram is a social media site that is used in a similar fashion in the sense that posts are short, to the point, and describe the picture or video posted. As of September 2015, there were 400 million active users on Instagram (Statista, 2015). Common themes on Instagram are food plating, healthy lifestyle images, and travel snapshots. Instagram is defined as being “The home for visual storytelling for everyone from celebrities, newsrooms and brands, to trends, musicians and anyone with a creative passion” (Instagram, 2016, n.p.). The last main social media site, LinkedIn, positioned itself in a field separate from the previous four.

LinkedIn strictly focuses on the professional world. This site connects “People, jobs, news updates, and insights” and helps the user to become more successful (LinkedIn, 2016, n.p.). As of the fourth quarter in 2015, there were 414 million LinkedIn members (Statista, 2015). The primary uses of LinkedIn are as a resume and a networking tool. LinkedIn also provides a space for individuals to post professional blogs and articles they have created. These five most popular social media platforms allow for increased and improved communication between businesses and their audiences.

Periasamy et al. (2011) highlighted the importance of social media in the *Rise of Social Media in Financial Services – Balancing Risk and Reward* when they wrote,

The power of social media can have a transformational impact in their corporate thinking and marketing capabilities. From connecting directly with end customers, or engaging with employees, to collaborating with partners, social media provides a significant value proposition that companies ignore at their



peril. As stakeholders increasingly adopt social technologies, the potential of social media can help companies grow customer loyalty, accelerate growth, and unleash their potential. (Periasamy et al., 2011, p. 5)

A strong social media presence will add value to a business through building their customers' trust in their organization, and because of this there tends to be an increased growth in customers and thereby increased success for the business. For these reasons, among many others, it is crucial that public relations professionals learn how to effectively use this relatively new form of communication.

### **Content Focused Communication**

Previous research has shown that companies need a mix of messages that show the socially conscious nature of the company and also the quality of the company's product/service. Weiting's and Wilson's (2013) research measured the amount of posts that focused on corporate ability (Cab), which is emphasizing a company's capabilities in producing quality products and services, and the amount on corporate social responsibility strategy (CSR), which is upholding the promises of a company and their performance of being a socially conscious citizen. The authors found that social media is used to cultivate relationships with consumers, and the best practice was to find the correct balance of Cab and CSR for each specific business. This combination of Cab and CSR is referred to as a holistic approach. Weiting and Wilson (2013) wrote that, "It would take a sophisticated strategic effort to maintain a constant balance between Cab and CSR posts on social media sites" (p. 12).

When it comes to content on social media, blogs are one of the best options due to their ability to include all the information a business desires. Blog posts, “Often contain insights from industry professionals or advice on taking particular actions in their careers or fields of interest” which adds to their credibility (Riddle, 2016, p. 1). Periasamy et al. (2011) agreed with Riddle by writing that blogs or video interviews are efficient ways to use social media to launch a new product or service.

Another tactic that can be used to push content out through social media sites is through infographics. These assist readers by walking them through concepts that tend to be complicated (Riddle, 2016). Typically, a graphic designer is involved when creating these types of posts. Riddle also recommends using list-based articles (such as BuzzFeed articles) and reviews about a product that would be relevant to your audiences (Riddle, 2016).

The method behind these content focused communication methods relates back to basic communication theory that tells us that, “Communication is a tool with which we exercise our influence on others, bring out changes in our and others’ attitudes, motivate the people around us and establish and maintain relationships with them” (Communication Theory, 2010, p. 1). These content focused communication methods used on social media platforms align with traditional communication theory tactics.

### **Conversation Platform**

Social media has opened up communication routes to new audiences. According to the Harvard Business Review, “The exponential growth of social media, from blogs, Facebook and Twitter to LinkedIn and YouTube, offers organizations the chance to join a conversation with

millions of customers around the globe every day” (Harvard Business Review, 2010, p. 1). Upon researching social networking sites as a conversation platform for consumers to interact with companies, Shin, Pang, and Jung Kim (2015) found that only 4 in 10 posts and tweets actually attempted to spark interactions with consumers. Also, when stakeholders attempted to contact people at an organization, they were often unsuccessful in receiving a reply.

Studies show that companies might be missing out on an opportunity to interact directly with their audience by underutilizing their social media sites as a conversation platform through their posts and tweets (Shin et al, 2015). Goh, Heng, and Lin (2012) wrote in their publication about the impact of social media, “Our findings show that engagement in social media brand communities leads to a positive increase in purchase expenditures” (p. 207).

While the focus of this thesis is on how businesses can use social media to interact with their customers, social media platforms do have benefits in the area of employee to employee communication. Groysberg and Slind (2012) researched how social technology also gives employees an opportunity to connect through personal conversation. Groysberg and Slind (2012) wrote that, “One-way broadcast messaging is a relic, and slick marketing materials have as little effect on employees as they do on customers. But people will listen to communication that is intimate, interactive, inclusive, and international” (p. 14). Social media also allows for different departments across the company to interact, share ideas, and build positive work culture. Breakenridge (2016) noted, “The ultimate liaison learns to move beyond the marketing communications department, to include other areas of the company, including sales, IT, legal, HR, R&D, etc., to share, collaborate and innovate together,” (p. 2).

By using social media as platforms for conversation, a business allows communication to flow between their employees and also between their business and their customers. This additional form of communication allows for increased trust, a way to answer questions and concerns, and also improve a company's culture and reputation. Another aspect of adding credibility to an organization's social media platforms is through using a consistent voice.

An organization's tone of voice is critical when it comes to brand management (Handley, 2016). Handley (2016) stated that, "In marketing, your tone of voice can be a significant differentiator and a strong advantage, because a lot of companies are not thinking about it" (p. 1). The tone of voice helps brand a company just as much as a logo, consistent color palette, signage, and fonts might (Handley, 2016). An organization's voice includes pronoun usage, jargon rules, and the distinct style which makes it unique. Voice is important to consider when posting, responding to concerns, and starting conversations. Breakenridge (2016) summarized the benefits of keeping up with conversations on social media by stating that, "The deep connections lead more quickly to higher level interactions, including advocacy and loyal customers," (p. 2).

### **Responding to Inquiries**

Social networking platforms such as Facebook and Twitter are being used by consumers to ask questions and give feedback. A study on the benefits of social media for businesses noted that, "Individuals and groups suddenly have a radical new ability to voice opinions through this new media, a channel never before available," due to its instantaneous nature (Merrill, Latham, Santalesa, & Navetta, 2011, p. 1). Aichner and Jacob (2015) explained that

social network users expect a response to their questions and concerns within hours now due to the fast-paced nature of the world of social media. Aichner and Jacob (2015) expressed that, “If companies ignore their users or react too late on critics this may evolve to global discussions about the weaknesses of the company itself or of its products, which eventually results in an economic damage for the company” (p. 261). Although, when critics complain on social platforms, they create potential opportunities for businesses to show other customers that the situation is being resolved (Periasamy et al., 2011).

Breakenridge (2016) expressed the importance of public relations professionals being risk managers, especially on social media platforms (2016). She stated that, “Social media allows us to have knowledge to prevent a crisis from sparking by diligently tracking and monitoring brand conversations and addressing issues more quickly than we could ever do before,” (Breakenridge, 2016, p. 2). One must be a proactive listener in order to protect the brand.

Responding to inquiries from consumers over social networking platforms and how that affects businesses and their brands is a relatively understudied topic. Communication experts emphasized that research could be extended by focusing on reactive messages in social media in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of social media sites (Weitling & Wilson, 2013). While interacting with consumers over social media platforms is important, it was found that not all industries have a need for communicating with their consumers in that way.

### **Uses Vary Based on Industry Type**

Previous research showed that service industries, such as insurance sales or beauty salons, and durable product industries, such as cars, actively used social media sites more often than nondurable product industries. Nondurable products include items such as candy and paper towels. Service industries and durable products use social media as a way to provide customers with another means of accessing their business, while nondurable product industries place less of a value on being accessible to their customers (Shin et al., 2015). This could be due to the service and durable industries' necessity of cultivating relationships with their customers. Services also have the challenge of being intangible. Social media sites have been able to provide more information to customers about a company's service, and in this way become more tangible in the customers' eyes (Shin et al., 2015).

Certain industries also have specific regulations they need to follow when using social media sites. In regards to the insurance industry using social media, the NAIC wrote that,

It is important that insurance entities have confidence that their investments into the medium (social media) will not result in unintended regulatory liabilities. For their part, regulators must be confident that insurance consumers are protected from false or misleading information and that the well-established principles of market regulation, including record retention, are recognized and respected. (NAIC, 2012, p. 1)

The financial industry possesses similar concerns when it comes to social media. As an already conservative industry, both regulations and the fear of "making a costly mistake driven by privacy considerations of open dialogue", banks find integrating social media into their

marketing strategy difficult (Freegard, 2011 p. 23). These regulations on traditional banks pose a threat to their business because non-banks, like Virgin Money, are not as bound to the regulations and are able to use their social media and social banking in innovative and superior ways (Kumar & Mittal, 2011). These regulations limit, and potentially threaten, industries with strict regulation laws.

Since many social media managers lack training on how to use their businesses' social media platforms, they are not only losing out on potential customers but are also placing themselves at potential risk. By not educating themselves on how their industry's regulations might extend to social media, they could open their business up to fines and a loss in credibility in their customers' eyes.

### **Method**

Qualitative interviews were conducted to determine how public relations professionals used social media. Before conducting the interviews, I went through the IRB certification process for both myself as the interviewer and for my specific research. These interviews were conducted face to face, through email, or over Skype. The participants needed to have worked with or must currently be working with social media in their place of business. The targeted age of participants is between 22 – 65+. The targeted audience are employees who manage and post/Tweet for their company's social media accounts.

Initially, I contacted these potential participants through mutual connections, LinkedIn, and cold calling. Participants for this research were from a wide variety of industries. Two were from financial businesses, one from a public relations firm, one from a digital advertising firm,

and one from a large non-profit. Each of the participants were in charge of or had a part in creating their organization's social media presence.

The interviews themselves ranged between 15 minutes and 45 minutes long. Four of the interviews were conducted over the phone, and one interview was an in person interview at that company's headquarters. All of the conversations were recorded using the application Call Recorder with the participant's permission.

Most qualitative studies are considered finished once the data begins to repeat itself, but in this case, the research participants were from a wide variety of industries and would not necessarily provide comparable answers to the interview questions. Because of this, the number of interviews needed was determined by the availability of the participants and the time constraints.

After the collection of interviews, they were then transcribed. Following the transcription process, pseudonyms were put in place of all identifiers such as names, organizations, and titles in order to ensure confidentiality for all research participants. The next step was to use analytical memos (detailed side notes) to capture the first impressions from the interviews. This step was informal, and helped provide context for the interviews before delving in and searching for themes. These memos were simply quick notes jotted down to help prepare for the analysis of the data. After the analytical memos were completed, coding began.

Coding the transcriptions was the next step towards analyzing the qualitative data. The first time through the transcriptions, open coding was used. This is unrestricted coding where the researcher is "open" to any and all possibilities of themes and findings in the data. The second step was to use axial coding. This coding links together pieces of data in a meaningful



way. This is the part of the process where categories are combined into logical themes (Keyton, 2006).

When starting the axial coding portion, I read through the transcriptions while keeping the themes from the literature review in mind. The seven potential themes were: most popular social media sites, types of posts, posting times and amounts, industry regulations, planning for social media, tracking, and credibility. Next, seven different colored highlighters were used to section off important quotations throughout each of the interviews. The highlighters were color coded to a specific topic, and quotes were highlighted when they appeared as though it had the potential to fit with one of the themes. This process is called the categorizing process. Since the first attempt at categorizing tends to create vague themes, it is acceptable to revise categories and themes throughout this process.

Following the coding process with highlighters, I approached the process of discovering categories and themes with the grounded theory, also known as the constant-comparative method (Keyton, 2006, p. 294). This theory states that, "Theory is grounded in the relationships between data and the categories into which they are coded; and codes and categories are mutable until late in the project" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 218). Coding is a two-step process when using this method. Using this method, all of the interviews were analyzed and specific themes were determined.

## Results

### Interviewee Descriptions:

|               |   |
|---------------|---|
| <b>Angela</b> | Angela is the head social media coordinator at a Midwestern bank that employs between 300-400 individuals.                                |
| <b>Bob</b>    | Bob is a freelance public relations coordinator in the Midwest that works with public officials and the hospitality industry.             |
| <b>Colton</b> | Colton manages a bank on the East coast that employs between 50-100 individuals. He is in charge of the bank's social media presence.     |
| <b>Drake</b>  | Drake is a public relations coordinator in charge of a Midwestern non-profit that connects with over 17,000 individuals.                  |
| <b>Eliza</b>  | Eliza is a social media manager at a Midwestern digital marketing agency that works with clients in financial and health care industries. |

### Themes Found

#### Theme #1: Types of Posts

The overarching theme for the types of posts that PR professionals use is a combination of conversation starters and information blasts. Drake expressed that they, "Both engage our audience through conversations, but we also push out information." Eliza stated that they, "Usually start out with 30% of the postings being linked directly back to the website to drive traffic back there. Then the last portion of the postings are inspirational or engaging and have no link there at all, but are just designed to get people talking."

All of the companies push updates, and product/service information through their social media sites. Taking the time to figure out what their audience is interested in and looking for is crucial when a business tries to push out information, according to Angela. The type of information ranges from informing customers about free mortgage calculators on their websites to showing how to use a wheelchair. Colton attempts to reach out by writing blogs about the financial industry on LinkedIn in order to help educate his customers. Companies have found that they can directly help their customers through these types of posts, and Eliza confirmed that, "Clients like to see that we are being more helpful."

When it comes to conversation starters, the companies use a variety of tactics. Drake asks questions geared toward their adult audiences such as "What are your plans with your troupes this year?" They also create posts asking individuals to "Tag a female leader who has inspired you" to generate increased views. Posting an article written about a topic pertinent to a business and captioning it with a question helps to spark comments. Eliza gave the example of posting an article about New York City's new handicap accessible taxi initiatives with the caption 'Wow, wouldn't it be great if all the major cities in the U.S. followed suit?' for one of their medical equipment clients. "That's all you have to do. I sprinkle it in and then they go nuts," according to Eliza.

Eliza also stressed that competitions, such as pet photo contests, are sure to get high engagement from their viewers. Bob generated talk by planning a contest where they, "Put the faces of a famous couple up, and if [they] know the names, [they] can come into the store and get a free rose." In addition to generating conversations, Angela and Eliza stated that they find value in showing the culture at their workplaces.

Eliza has clients all over the country, and by sharing posts about their employees and happenings at their headquarters, their clients' trust in their company has grown. Angela added that they, "Try to push our community events through Facebook. We try to get people to see how we are involved." They also tend to use their Instagram to show behind the scenes looks at their headquarters. These posts strengthen the connection between the company and their customers. Angela expressed that, "Engagement needs to be focused on. You don't always care about all the 'likes'. While that's part of it, it's not the only part you need to focus on." Concluding remarks by Angela summarized the main goal of these companies' social media sites: "The main thing with social media is that it needs to be social."

## **Theme #2: Posting and Planning for Social Media**

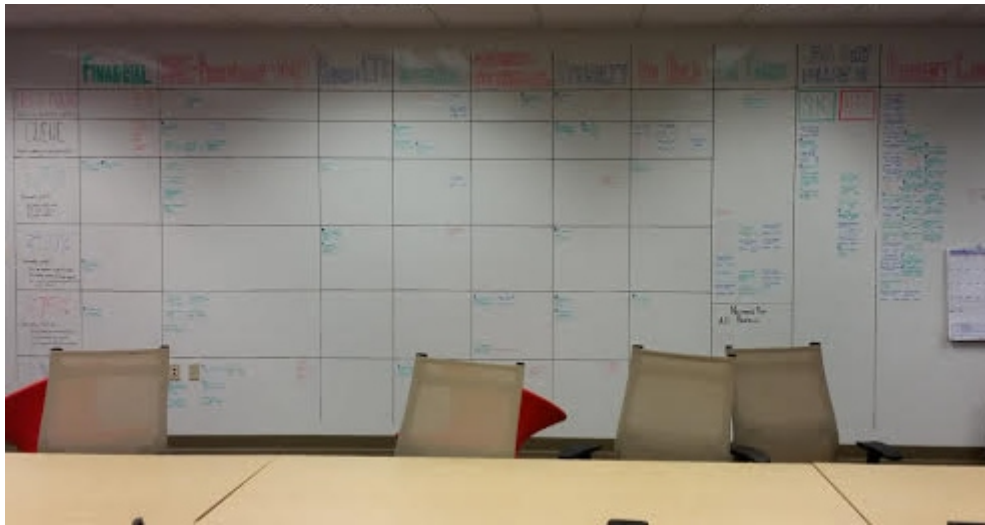
The general consensus for the ideal amount of posts was that there should be at least one post a day, and that it should also be on a regular schedule. When asked about their post schedules, comments included, "That can vary dramatically," "We don't really have a set in stone schedule," "Not as often as I used to," and "Ideally, we want to post every day." It appears that while PR professionals strive to post regularly every day, it does not always happen that way. Eliza, who helps their clients run their social media accounts, stated that they recommend their clients post every day. Eliza stated that, "Most of them contract with us for 2-3 posts, and there's a small group that has 4 posts a week. I always recommend to the client on those opposite days, you should post something from your company." In order to post this often, it is important to create a social media schedule to follow.

Four out of five of the companies create a calendar where they map out their social media posts. The trend for making these calendars is to, “Go back to what has been done in years past... like the Super Bowl or Christmas, and ... lay that out on the yearly calendar and then figure out the empty times” (Angela). Eliza has a similar method, but also ensures that they, “Put out a calendar that is a mixture... of company postings, inspirational, and industry type postings.” Each of these calendars’ posts have been planned to appeal to a specific audience. When creating the plans for a client’s social media, Eliza asks their client to, “Tell them everything about them [their audience] that you can, because I think a huge part of it is understanding your audience.”

The companies that created calendars for their social media all spent time planning with their teams. The teams varied between being a few individuals to having the entire marketing department weigh in on the calendar plan. Eliza added that their social media plans are evaluated throughout the month for their customers, and that the results might dictate what is planned for the next month of posts. At the beginning, “You just can’t know until you start posting and see what they respond to.”

Figures 2 and 3 are from Eliza’s company’s headquarters showing their large wall calendar and planning area. Eliza has monthly meetings with the entire staff where they update each other on the progress of each project.

**Figure 2:** Eliza's company's social media tracking calendar.



**Figure 3:** Eliza's company's planning wall.



In regards to scheduling their posts, Angela, Bob, Drake, and Eliza use the scheduling option on Facebook. Drake stated that they have found Hootsuite, a social media scheduler, to be ineffective because when a tweet is scheduled for Twitter, it only posts a link to the photo

attached, not the actual image. To work around these issues, Drake schedules their posts for Facebook and then, once it has been posted on Facebook, they share the post to their other platforms.

### **Theme #3: Tracking**

Social media analytics, specifically Facebook's, are used by a majority of the companies when they analyze their social media efforts. Bob stated that they look at growth in likes and shares, but that is not the only effort these companies use for tracking. Both Angela and Eliza track how many individuals visit their website from specific sites or sources, but they do so in two different ways. Angela, "Create(s) separate landing pages for our social media sites," while Bob focuses on using campaign URLs for specific campaigns and Google analytics to track their acquisition base on the source. Eliza uses campaign URLs for tracking so that they do not have duplicate content by creating several identical landing pages.

Eliza provided an example of how their company assists their clients in their social media campaigns.

"Client A had created several landing pages, all identical. I had a heart attack about it because it's duplicate content, and he had created two landing pages on there, identical, and had had two different URLs thinking that that was how he was going to track how successful radio was to how successful newspaper was. I instead created campaign URLs for that that he would send to the radio for people to click on and he would send to the newsroom for people to click on for

the same landing page. He was dazzled by the results and how cleanly it came through. Then you don't have to dial into the pages and see how popular they were. You can look at the campaign and see how popular that was."

#### **Theme #4: Industry Regulations**

Something that none of the companies were asked about but that four out of the five brought up was industry regulations in regards to social media. Angela, Colton, and Eliza highlighted the restrictions that exist in the financial industry. Colton stated that, "In the financial industry, we have to be very careful with confidentiality and regulatory issues in what we do." Eliza expressed that, "The financial industry is highly regulated on what you can post, and also what disclaimers you need to post along with different content. If you post about a product, you must post the Member FDIC logo along with it." Angela stated that in financial industries, "There are so many different compliance issues. People don't want all that information public. There is a sense of security there that you don't want to see everything out in the open."

Bob, whose clients includes the public policy industry, shed light on the other side of the social media. "There are a lot of efforts to stay out of the media, just as much as there is to get in it. We are paid a lot of times to keep things from seeing daylight." In regards to the health care industries, Eliza highlighted the HIPA regulations and the new initiation of creating ADA compliant websites. If an industry does their social media correctly and according to their industry's standards, it can increase the trust that their customers place in them.



**Theme #5: Credibility**

When it came to how each company ensured credibility on their social media platforms, the answers all varied. Angela stated, “We want to be intentional about what we are posting. In that way, they don’t get lost in the clutter.” Bob gave the example of how they work with a local celebrity chef with their social media and how they attempt to keep the same voice throughout their postings, even though they are all written by a different people. Bob also emphasized responding to customer complaints on social media. “When a customer complains on social media, you have to respond, and you have to do it timely. It’s not just about that person who complained. It’s also about all the other followers who will see that you care.”

Eliza agreed with Bob that being responsive to customers on social media is an invaluable method to show that your business is credible. Eliza also emphasized not giving a canned response to customers so that they know they have been heard and will eventually be helped. These specific tactics will help increase a business’s credibility when combined with a variety of posts and a correct usage of social media according to a business’s specific industry.

**Discussion**

The major findings of this study include the types of posts public relations professionals compose, how they learn to connect with their audiences, and how to plan and schedule for their social media platforms. According to PR professionals, it is important post a mixture of informative and conversation style posts. The mixture allows for their audience to learn new information about products and services, and also for the company to help their customers. It is crucial for companies to push past the advertisement usage of social media and actually help

their customers by keeping them updated on the industry happenings, mortgage rates, how to use the latest wheelchair, and etc.

When it comes to sparking conversations, these public relations professionals used contests, giveaways, and relevant articles with a question in the caption to engage their audiences. These companies interacted with their customers through these posts, and they also made sure to reply to questions, complaints, and concerns. In this way, the customer gains trust in the company and also potentially improves the company's reputation in their mind.

Before a business begins creating their social media presence, they must first figure out which platform their audience uses. The main social media sites that public relations professionals used were Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, but a few companies used LinkedIn, YouTube, and Pinterest in an attempt to reach their more specific audiences. The public relations professionals recommended posting at least once a day, although none of them succeeded in accomplishing that task. In addition to learning where and when to post, it is crucial for a company to follow their industry's regulations when using social media. While there is not a foolproof system to follow for every single business, there are clear guidelines that social media managers can follow to improve their social media presence.

These social media guidelines match up with many of the findings from previous studies. According to Weiting and Wilson (2013), it takes a strategic effort to plan posts for social media platforms that maintain a good balance between product information posts and community minded posts. This supports the findings in Theme #2: Posting and Planning for Social Media because the interviewees stressed the importance of creating a social media schedule in order to ensure a balance of information blasts and conversation starters. Aichner and Jacob (2015)

and Periasamy et al. (2011) highlighted the importance of public relations professionals responding to customers on social media platforms. While it might appear that they are only interacting with one customer, there is the opportunity for thousands of individuals to see how a company handles complaints, questions, and concerns. This supports the findings in Theme #5: Credibility because being available as a business and responding to concerns boosts a business's credibility.

In terms of social platforms to use, Periasamy et al. (2011) explained how blogs were beneficial when promoting products and services. Only a couple of the public relations professionals mentioned the use of such platforms. This could be due to the amount of time and effort it takes to upkeep a business blog. Colton emphasized his use of blogs on LinkedIn in Theme #1: Types of Posts as a way to connect and educate his customers, although he did warn that blogs are quite time consuming. In regards to differing industry usage, the NAIC wrote that it is critical that companies comply with their industry's regulations on social media. The potential detriments of failing to comply could lead to financial loss and the loss of consumer trust (NAIC, 2012). This supports the information found in Theme #4: Industry Regulations on the importance of keeping up to date with industry regulations.

My recommendations for those starting their business's social media presence is that they research what platforms their target audience use. Four out of the five PR professionals stressed the use of Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. This would be a great place for startups to begin. Afterwards, it is critical to continue researching other platforms that might allow one to better reach their audience. The next step would be to create a written monthly plan for the social media accounts. The planned posts should keep in mind holidays, cover any business and

community events, and incorporate applicable information that their audience might find helpful in their own lives. Ideally, the business's social media manager should post every day and ensure that their posts are a mixture of information blasts and conversation starters.

After the first month, the social media manager should analyze the results of their posts by using Facebook analytics, google analytics, and campaign URLs. This will show what types of posts best engage their target audience, and also show how effective their social media was at driving their audience to their website. From this information, the next month's social media calendar should reflect the findings from the analytics. While all of this information is relevant for social media managers, there were a few limitations that kept this study from collecting as much data as possible.

One of the main limitations of this research was the small number of interview participants. Not only would an increase in the number of organizations interviewed allow for more data, but it would also increase the different types of industries included in this study. With additional time, there would have been a greater chance to secure interviews with organizations in more service and non-durable goods industries. Additional information would have improved the credibility of the resulting themes by enabling the research to continue until the data began to repeat itself.

A second limitation was the location of businesses across the United States. If transportation time and funds would have been unlimited, more interviews could have been at businesses' headquarters across the country. This would have provided insight that would be applicable to all public relations professionals in the United States regardless of geographic location.

### **Conclusion**

This study is relevant for any individual managing a business's social media platforms who is attempting to improve their social media presence, especially if they possess limited knowledge and are just beginning the process. Many individuals who run their business's social media accounts lack training and guidance, and because of that businesses are losing out on connecting with a large percentage of individuals with buying power. Studies on the impact of social media show that when customers engage in a brand's social media community there is a positive increase in purchases (Goh et al., 2012). It is crucial for a business's social media manager to understand not only the importance of connecting with their audience through social media platforms, but also how to do so effectively.

After reading through this thesis in its entirety, a social media novice should be able to plan, schedule, track, and figure out what kind of posts to compose for their business's social media sites. They would possess a better understanding of how to run their social media sites and see positive results after putting it into practice. This strong foundation can be built upon to continually grow their business's social media presence. By connecting with new audiences, increasing their customers' trust in their business, and providing a platform to build relationships with their customers, the social media manager who follows these guidelines should see an increase in their business's profits due to their improved social media presence.

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## Appendixes

### Interview Questions

1. How is your business's social media used? Is it as a conversation platform to engage your audience, to push out information, or something completely different?
2. Who are your audiences? Do you try and target specific ones?
3. How often do you post?
4. What seems to be best practiced when it comes to social media in your industry?
5. Do you find that your business uses social media in a different way than other industries and if so, how? Examples?
6. How do you create your social media sites to be a credible sources for your audience?
7. How do you hope to use your social media in the future?
8. Would you take me through the whole process of how you create the plan or set the standards for how your business uses social media?
9. Do you have examples of what has been most successful in the past? Why were those successful?
10. On the flip side, do you have examples of what has been least successful in the past? Why was this unsuccessful?
11. Finally, what type of training have you done through/does your business look for when hiring individuals to run the social media accounts?

## University of Northern Iowa Standard Application for Human Participants Review

Note: Before completing application, investigators must consult guidance at:  
<http://www.uni.edu/rsp/irb> Always check website to download current forms.

All items must be completed and the form must be typed or printed electronically. Submit 2 hard copies to the Human Participants Review Committee, Office of Research and Sponsored Programs, 213 East Bartlett, mail code 0394

Title of proposal: How Public Relations Professionals Use Social Media

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Name of (PI) Principal Investigator(s): Abigail Jen Kreun

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PI Status:     Faculty     Undergraduate Student     Graduate Student     Staff     Non-UNI

Project Type:     Faculty/Staff Research     Thesis/Dissertation     Other-specify: \_\_\_\_\_

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PI Department: Communications    PI Phone: (712) 470-3130    PI Email: kreuna@uni.edu

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PI Address or Mail Code: 2900 Hudson Rd., Noehren #384, Cedar Falls, IA 50613

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Faculty Advisor Mail Code: 0139    Advisor Phone: 273-7159    Advisor Email: Tom.hall@uni.edu

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Source of Funding: \_\_\_\_\_

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Project dates: Beginning 10/15/15    Through 5/1/16

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All key personnel and Advisor (if applicable) must be listed and must complete IRB training/certification in Human Participants Protections. Attach a copy of the certificate, if not already on file *in the IRB office*.

|                        |                   |                         |                          |         |                                     |
|------------------------|-------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|---------|-------------------------------------|
| Principal Investigator | Abigail Jen Kreun | Certificate Attached    | <input type="checkbox"/> | On File | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| Co-Investigator(s)     |                   | Certificate(s) Attached | <input type="checkbox"/> | On File | <input type="checkbox"/>            |
| Faculty Advisor        | Tom Hall          | Certificate Attached    | <input type="checkbox"/> | On File | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| Other Key Personnel:   | _____ (name)      | Certificate Attached    | <input type="checkbox"/> | On File | <input type="checkbox"/>            |
| Other Key Personnel:   | _____ (name)      | Certificate Attached    | <input type="checkbox"/> | On File | <input type="checkbox"/>            |

**SIGNATURES: The undersigned acknowledge that: 1. this application represents an accurate and complete description of the proposed research; 2. the research will be conducted in compliance with the recommendations of and only after approval has been received the UNI IRB. The PI is responsible for reporting any adverse events or problems to the IRB, for requesting prior IRB approval for modifications, and for requesting continuing review and approval.**

|  |               |           |         |
|--|---------------|-----------|---------|
| Principal Investigator:                              | Abigail Kreun |           | 9/25/15 |
|  | TYPED NAME    | SIGNATURE | DATE    |
| Co-Investigator(s):                                  |               |           |         |
|  | TYPED NAME    | SIGNATURE | DATE    |
| Faculty Advisor (required for all student projects): | Tom Hall      |           | 9/25/15 |
|  | TYPED NAME    | SIGNATURE | DATE    |

|  |   |  |
|--|---|--|
| <b>Committee Use Only</b>                              |   |  |
| EXEMPT FROM CONTINUING REVIEW <input type="checkbox"/> | EXPEDITED APPROVAL <input type="checkbox"/> | FULL BOARD APPROVAL <input type="checkbox"/> |
| REVIEW COMMITTEE SIGNATURE _____                       | DATE _____                                  |  |
| Period of approval: Effective _____                    | through _____                               |  |

## **A. PURPOSE OF RESEARCH.**

---

Explain 1) why this research is important and what the primary purposes are, 2) what question(s) or hypotheses this activity is designed to answer, and 3) whether and how the results will be used or disseminated to others.

1) To gain understanding and knowledge about how to effectively use social media in a public relations career. To gain potential career connections and options through networking.

2) How do Public Relations professionals effectively use social media in their campaigns?

3) The results will be published.

## **B. RESEARCH PROCEDURES INVOLVED.**

---

Provide a step-by-step description of all study procedures (e.g., where and how these procedures will take place, presentation of materials, description of activity required, topic of questionnaire or interview). Provide this information for each phase of the study (pilot, screening, intervention and follow-up). Attach questionnaires, interview questions/topic areas, scales, and/or examples of materials to be presented to participants.

The qualitative data will be gathered through interviews. These will be conducted face to face, over the phone, or over Skype. I will be using the snowball sampling technique to find my participants. I will randomly interview Public Relations professionals who I find through mutual connections. These potential participants will be contacted through email or LinkedIn to gauge interest (See Appendix A). This method will prove to be most effective for studying this topic since human interaction is so intricate. The interview questions will focus on casual relationships to determine how applying certain techniques affects social media responses.

There will also be a literature review portion of my thesis. I will gather information about how Public Relations professionals effectively use social media through academic articles I find online.

### C. DECEPTION.

---

If any deception or withholding of complete information is required for this activity: a) explain why this is necessary and b) explain if, how, when, and by whom participants will be debriefed. Attach debriefing script.

There will be no deception used.

### D. PARTICIPANTS.

---

1. Approximately how many participants will you need to **complete** this study?

Number 10 + Age Range(s) 22-65

2. What characteristics (inclusion criteria) must participants have to be in this study? (Answer for each participant group, if different.)

Participants must be involved in or in charge of social media in their place of work.

3. Describe how you will recruit your participants and who will be directly involved in the recruitment. Key personnel directly responsible for recruitment and collection of data must complete human participant protection training. Attach all recruiting advertisements, flyers, contact letters, telephone contact protocols, web site template, PSPM description, etc. that you will use to recruit participants. If you plan to contact them verbally, in person or over the telephone, you must provide a script of what will be said.

Note: Recruitment materials, whether written or oral, should include at least: a) purpose of the research; b) general description of what the research will entail; and c) your contact information if individuals are interested in participating in the research.

I will recruit my participants by acquiring contacts from mutual connections. These mutual connections will be through my UNI professors, past employers, and family members.

I will reach out to them through email, LinkedIn, and phone calls. (See attached scripts).

4. How will you protect participants' privacy during recruitment? Note: This question does not pertain to the confidentiality of the data; rather it relates to protecting privacy in the recruitment process when recruitment may involve risks to potential participants. Individual and indirect methods of contacting potential participants assist in protecting privacy.

Their privacy will be protected since I will be reaching out to individuals who do not know me personally. They will not feel pressured to participate in my study if they are unwilling or

unable. It will be a one on one interaction so that no pressure will be felt to participate.

5. Explain what steps you will take during the recruitment process to minimize potential undue influence, coercion, or the appearance of coercion. What is your relationship to the potential participants? If participants are employees, students, clients, or patients of the PI or any key personnel, please describe how undue influence or coercion will be mitigated.

I will attempt to minimize potential undue influence by always stating that I understand if they are unwilling or unable to participate in the study. All participants will be contacted through mutual connections. I will know none of the participants on a personal level.

6. Will you give compensation or reimbursement to participants in the form of gifts, payments, services without charge, or course credit? If course credit is provided, please provide a listing of the research alternatives and the amount of credit given for participation and alternatives.

No  Yes If yes, explain:

7. Where will the study procedures be carried out? If any procedures occur off-campus, who is involved in conducting that research? Attach copies of IRB approvals or letters of cooperation from non-UNI research sites if procedures will be carried out elsewhere. (Letters of cooperation are required from all schools where data collection will take place, including Price Lab School.)

On campus  Off campus  Both on- and off-campus

Research will be conducted both on and off campus at the interviewees choosing, but all research will be conducted by me, Abbie Kreun.

8. Do offsite research collaborators involved in participant recruitment or data collection have human participants protections training? Note: Individuals serving as a "conduit" for the researcher (i.e., reading a recruitment script developed by the researcher and not in a supervisory or evaluative role with participants) are not considered key personnel and human participants training is not required.

No  Yes  Don't know  Not applicable

---



## **E. RISKS AND BENEFITS.**

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1. All research carries some social, economic, psychological, or physical risk. Describe the nature and degree of risk of possible injury, stress, discomfort, invasion of privacy, and other side effects from all study procedures, activities, and devices (standard and experimental), interviews and questionnaires. Include psychosocial, emotional and political risks as well as physical risks.

The potential risks of this study are minimal.

2. Explain what steps you will take to minimize risks of harm and to protect participants' confidentiality, rights and welfare. (If you will include protected groups of participants which include minors, fetuses in utero, prisoners, pregnant women, or cognitively impaired or economically or educationally disadvantaged participants, please identify the group(s) and answer this question for each group.)

The only identifiers that will be recorded are the participants' names, titles, and places of employment. Pseudonyms will be used in the published document to protect participants.

3. Study procedures often have the potential to lead to the unintended discovery of a participant's personal medical, psychological, and/or psycho-social conditions that could be considered to be a risk for that participant. Examples might include disease, genetic predispositions, suicidal behavior, substance use difficulties, interpersonal problems, legal problems or other private information. How will you handle such discoveries in a sensitive way if they occur?

It is anticipated that this will not reveal any serious conditions. However, if any conditions were to be discovered, this information will be reported and referrals to appropriate agencies or authorities will be given.

4. Describe the anticipated benefits of this research for individual participants. If none, state "None."

None.

5. Describe the anticipated benefits of this research for the field or society, and explain how the benefits outweigh the risks.

The anticipated benefits of researching how to effectively use social media is that this is a relatively new topic in research and as such would provide useful new data to the Public Relations field. Many small businesses do not have the money to hire a team of Public Relations professionals to run their social media sites, but they should be able to read this

completed study and find tips that they can put into practice by themselves.

The benefit of increasing the knowledge of how to effectively use social media in the Public Relations field is that people will have a better chance of receiving information that is potentially helpful, necessary, or beneficial in some way to their lives.

## **F. CONFIDENTIALITY OF RESEARCH DATA.**

---

1. Will you record any participant identifiers? (Direct personal identifiers include information such as name, address, telephone number, social security number, identification number, medical record number, license number, photographs, biometric information, etc. Indirect personal identifiers include information such as race, gender, age, zip code, IP address, major, etc.)

No  Yes If yes, explain a) why recording identifiers is necessary and b) what methods you will use to maintain confidentiality of the data (e.g., separating the identifiers from the other data; assigning a code number to each participant to which only the research team has access; encrypting the data files; use of passwords and firewalls, and/or destroying tapes after transcription is complete and using pseudonyms.) Also explain, c) who will have access to the research data other than members of the research team, (e.g., sponsors, advisers, government agencies) and d) how long you intend to keep the data.

a) Recording identifies such as participants' names and places of employment.

b) The only individuals who will know the participants' information is my advisor, Jessica Moon, and myself.

2. After data collection is complete, will you retain a link between study code numbers and direct identifiers?

No  Yes If yes, explain why this is necessary and for how long you will keep this link.

3. Do you anticipate using any data (information, interview data, etc.) from this study for other studies in the future?

No  Yes If yes, explain and **include this information in the consent form.**

---

## G. ADDITIONAL INFORMATION.

---

1. Will you access participants' medical, academic, or other personal records for screening purposes or data collection during this study? Note: A record means any information recorded in any way, including handwritten, print, computer media, video or audio tape, film, photographs, microfilm, or microfiche that is directly related to a participant.

No  Yes. If yes, specify types of records, what information you will take from the records and how you will use them. **Permission for such access must be included in the consent form.**

2. Will you make sound or video recordings or photographs of study participants?

No  Yes. If yes, explain what type of recordings you will make, how long you will keep them, and if anyone other than the members of the research team will be able to see them. **A statement regarding the utilization of photographs or recordings must be included in the consent information.**

I will use audio recording in order to transcribe the interviews I will be conducting with participants. The audio recordings will be deleted after May 2016. My thesis advisor, Tom Hall, will be able to listen to these recordings.

## H. CONSENT FORMS/PROCESS (Check all that apply.)

---

**Written Consent** - Attach a copy of all consent and assent forms.

**Oral Consent** - Provide a) justification for not obtaining written consent, and b) a script for seeking oral consent and/or assent.

a) The information provided from the participants will result in little to no harm. These interviews will also be conducted orally, and it will be more convenient for the participants if they are able to give consent orally in person, over the phone, or over Skype.

b) "The information from this interview will be used in my research thesis. This information will be published after May of 2016. Your name, title, and place of employment will be necessary information for this research, and there is a possibility of these three identifiers to be included in the final draft. Do you understand these terms? Do I have your consent to use the information provided by you for this research topic purpose?"

**Elements of Consent Provided via Letter or Electronic Display** – Provide a) justification for not obtaining written consent, and b) the text for the letter of consent or the electronic display.)

**Waiver of Consent** Provide a written justification of waiver of consent process. Note that waiver of consent is extremely rare and would only be granted if the consent process itself posed a greater risk to participants than did participation in the research.

## **Appendix A**

### **Initial Contact Procedure**

#### **Email and LinkedIn Script**

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

My name is Abigail Kreun, and I am a senior Public Relations major with a marketing minor at the University of Northern Iowa. I am currently working on my honors thesis where I am conducting qualitative research on how Public Relations professionals effectively use social media in their campaigns.

I was wondering if you would be willing and able to be interviewed by me for about 20-30 minutes on this topic within the next month. The interviews would take place in person, on the phone, or over Skype.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Abigail Kreun

## **Appendix B**

### **Sample Interview Questions**

- What social media platforms does your business use and why?
- What are the tactics you use to connect your business with your audience through social media?
- What type of research do you conduct to learn about your target audience on social media?
- Do you have examples of successfully executed posts, Tweets, etc.?
- What makes these examples successful from your businesses' point of view?

## Appendix C

### Informed Consent Form

This interview's purpose is to discover how Public Relations professionals successfully use social media in their campaigns. The findings will benefit the Public Relations field by contributing information to an under-researched topic which is effective social media usage in Public Relations. The risks for participating in this interview are minimal.

The information provided in this interview will be used and published by Abigail Kreun from the University of Northern Iowa in an honors thesis. Your name, title, and place of employment will be confidential, and pseudonyms will be used in place of your information in the published document. The only individuals who will know your information will be Abigail Kreun, her thesis advisor, and the University of Northern Iowa's Honors Program director, Jessica Moon.

Participation in this interview is voluntary. Interviewees do not need to answer every question during the interview. The interview will last between 15-30 minutes.

Do you understand the research topic, the motivation for the research, and how your information will be used?

If yes, please sign and date below:

Sign:

Date:

---

---

**Contact Information**

Primary Investigator:

Abigail Kreun

Senior: Public Relations major, Marketing minor

University of Northern Iowa

2900 Hudson, Rd. – Room #384

Cedar Falls, IA 50613

Cell: 712-470-3130

Thesis Advisor:

Tom Hall

Associate Professor and Graduate Program Director

University of Northern Iowa

Lang 316

Cedar Falls, IA 50614

Office: 319-273-7159

IRB Administrator:

Christopher W. Larimer, Ph.D.

Associate Professor of Political Science

University of Northern Iowa

349 Sabin Hall

Cedar Falls, IA 50614-0404

Office: 319-273-6047

## **Appendix D**

### **Oral Consent Script**

This interview's purpose is to discover how Public Relations professionals successfully use social media in their campaigns. The findings will benefit the Public Relations field by contributing information to an under-researched topic which is effective social media usage in Public Relations. The risks for participating in this interview are minimal.

The information provided in this interview will be used and published by me, Abigail Kreun, from the University of Northern Iowa in an honors thesis. Your name, title, and place of employment will be confidential, and pseudonyms will be used in place of your information in the published document. The only individuals who will know your information will be myself, Abigail Kreun, my thesis advisor, and the University of Northern Iowa's Honors Program director, Jessica Moon.

Participation in this interview is voluntary. Interviewees do not need to answer every question during the interview. The interview will last between 15-30 minutes.

Do you understand the research topic, the motivation for the research, and how your information will be used?

### **Contact Information**

Primary Investigator:

Abigail Kreun

Senior: Public Relations major, Marketing minor

University of Northern Iowa

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