

## **Tagged: A Strategic Social Media Marketing Classroom Activity**

**Dr. Marilyn Martin Melchiorre**

Assistant Professor of Business

The College of Idaho

2112 Cleveland Blvd

Caldwell, Idaho

USA

### **Abstract**

*Social media is a growing part of the marketing strategy for businesses and organizations. As such, instructors at higher learning institutions need to prepare students for strategic application of social media marketing. Instructors are often left to develop their own practices for implementing social media into course assignments. This paper is a case study of the implementation of an experiential social media marketing activity in a marketing course. The main learning objective of the activity was to have students go beyond their personal understanding and social application of Facebook and Instagram. "Tagged" was a practical assignment designed to help college students appreciate these social media tools as an avenue for generating marketing activity, engagement, branding, and awareness for an organization. Details of this activity are covered in detail. Tagged could be duplicated at any college or university where there was a positive working relationship with the marketing office/department.*

**Keywords:** Marketing; Social Media; Experiential Learning; Instagram; Facebook

### **1. Introduction**

Social media is a growing part of marketing strategy for businesses and organizations today (*eMarketer*, 2013). "Tagged" was a cooperative college assignment between a faculty member, students in a marketing course, and the marketing and communication office at a college/university. The main learning objective of the activity was to have students go beyond their personal understanding and social application of Facebook and Instagram. Tagged was a practical assignment designed to help students appreciate these social media tools as an avenue for generating marketing activity, engagement, branding, and awareness for an organization.

Experiential learning infers that people can acquire information from concrete experiences (Kolb, 1984). The Tagged assignment was a planned activity that focused on students learning from their experience in an undergraduate *Integrated Marketing Communication* course. The development of this activity came from a professor's desire to provide more practical application in the curriculum. Many educators focus on student learning and do not give the student the opportunity to apply what is learned (Caffarella & Daffron, 2013). The most important part in curriculum development is that students learn the connection between theory and application (McLeod, 2013). According to Harrigan and Hulbert (2011) "we are at the stage where marketing academia has a lot to learn from marketing practice" (p. 254). The Tagged assignment was an attempt to bridge this gap between curriculum and a practical need to use social media tools as a component of an organization's marketing strategy.

### **2. Social Media Marketing**

The relevance of the Tagged assignment parallels the growing importance for students to recognize the application of social media channels as essential marketing tools. The internet and information technology have dramatically changed today's marketing environment for all businesses and organizations. This digital revolution has generated new technologies that make the field of marketing simultaneously faster, easier, different, and more complex (Pride & Ferrell, 2012). As marketers deal with an increasingly fractured media landscape, they will continue to shift their focus away from traditional media to digital channels (*eMarketer*, 2013).

In a recent survey of marketing practitioners, over three-quarters of the respondents said they planned for an increased focus for using social media to market their organizations (*eMarketer*, 2013). Most Millennials/Generation Y, 18-to-36 year-olds, are comfortable with social media for personal use (Millennials: Technology = Social Connection, 2014) and will be expected to handle social media platforms as professionals in fields like marketing, public relations and journalism (Jacques, 2009). These trends in marketing further supports the importance of learning activities in college to prepare future practitioners with practical application experience using social media.

Social media sites for colleges and universities are designed to provide interaction with current students, faculty, staff, alumni, potential students, and parents of students (R. Post, personal communication, March 11, 2014). The Tagged assignment allowed current students to provide content/photos for Instagram and Facebook that they found interesting on campus. This allowed the social media sites to accurately reflect a student's perspective of campus. As the name of the assignment infers "tagged" means the assignment was encouraging people to tag/label themselves in the photos posted on the social media sites. The tagging facilitates the network effect and exposure of an individual photo to more people (Shapiro, Varian, 1998). Once a photo is tagged with a person's name it will then show up on their social media site exposing the content to their followers. This network effect provides additional promotion and exposure for the college/university Facebook and Instagram accounts. The Tagged activity pulls potential followers into the college/university site with relevant and engaging content about activities on the campus. Social media contributes to the building of the college/university brand and Tagged facilitates this engagement from a student's/ Millennial's perspective.

## 2.1 Tagged Assignment

Tagged was an assignment completed during one semester. Students selected their teams of either two or three people to work with for taking photos. The teams were assigned a one week timeframe during the semester where they were responsible for taking ten photos at four different locations on campus. Ideas for areas to take photos: Academic classes (obtain faculty approval), Activities on Campus, Intramurals, Clubs, Organizations, Greek Life, Athletic Events, Student life (various campus locations), Library, Dorm Rooms, Book Store. This assignment was also a competition between the teams, as the best photos would be judged by the marketing and communication department staff. Students could gain the prestige of having the best photo for the assignment, as well as earn extra credit points for the course.

The professor created a full disclosure handout for students to distribute to those people who would have their pictures taken as part of the Tagged assignment. The handout also included the faculty member's contact information should there be any concerns while the activity was taking place on campus. See Figure 1, Informational Handout, given to those who were photographed.

A Tagged Assignment Summary Sheet, was the document students turned in for the activity. The form included ample space to help ensure the students would photograph a variety of campus locations. On the form, students also provided written captions that they felt were appropriate for the photo. So not only were the photos from the students' perspective, the captions were also from a students' perspective. The use of appropriate hashtags (#) was requested and discussed as part of the assignment. Hashtags promote an additional network effect on social media. The assignment name on campus evolved to "Tagged Tuesday." Tuesday was the day students turned their photos in on the learning management system and to Dropbox. The photos were subsequently posted to social media on Tuesday.

Tagged was a project-based group activity. Some research shows group projects can facilitate student motivation (Denton, 1994) and increase deeper thinking (Deeter-Schmelz, Kennedy, & Ramsey, 2002). While other scholars' argue group activities can lead to social loafing (Aggarwal & O'Brien, 2008). In an effort to make all group members accountable to engage in the activity, an evaluation of participation was created. The evaluation asked for an assessment of commitment, cooperation and contribution for each person on the team.

The assignment was an ongoing semester activity and discussed each week in class. Feedback was obtained from the college/university marketing and communication staff on a regular basis. Each week the students learned what photos were getting more "Likes" than others. It then became a competition for the students to vie for the most "Likes." Other discussion topics related on how to write more engaging descriptions or what hashtags (#) were more effective were also incorporated into the class discussion. The assignment was a continuous dialog where students received direct feedback on the work they turned in for the Tagged assignment.

At the end of the semester, the marketing and communication office staff chose the three most engaging photos. The staff members also visited the class on occasion and provided their feedback directly to the students.

## **2.2 Assessment of Results**

Social media activity is easily tracked and quantifiable (Pride & Ferrell, 2012). The photos from the assignment were regularly posted to Instagram and Facebook and limited number of photos were used on Twitter. The college/university used the site Statigram to analyze data from the Instagram account. The college/university launched the Instagram account on August 30, 2013, so the timing of this assignment aligned with the need to create awareness for the account. Photos from the Tagged assignment were posted between September 24 and December 10, 2014. Figure 2 provides the graphic analysis of the Instagram account and the increase in “Likes” during this timeframe.

The college/university was averaging between 15-20 “Likes” on Instagram photos between August and September (R. Post, personal communication, March 11, 2014). The first photos from the assignment posted on September 24 through 26, 2013. The first three photos had 27 likes and 5 comments, 21 likes and 5 comments and 13 likes and 4 comments, respectively. The first photo posted was a group of students at an athletic event. It obtained the most “Likes” of any previously posted photos on the Instagram account. On the initial photo post, the “You’ve Been Tagged” activity was explained and students were encouraged to “Tag” themselves in the photo. In the beginning, “Likes” and “Tags” were solicited from followers. By the end of October, there was no longer a need to solicit tags as students were actively engaged in the tagging. Figure 3 shows the increase in comments made on photos during the assignment timeframe. The increase in “Likes” and comments reflects the involvement in follower engagement.

Follower engagement was positive and it appeared the network effect was also working. The number of account followers increased significantly between September and December 2013 as well. The number of followers grew from just over one hundred to close to five hundred followers. The three months of the assignment facilitated active growth on the account.

Photos for Tagged were also posted weekly in a Facebook photo album. Photos for each week were posted at one time on Tuesday to a folder called “TAGGED.” The first photo posted on Facebook was the same photo posted on Instagram; students at an athletic event. The photo received 23 “Likes”; the most “Likes” of the 132 photos posted during the semester. The “Likes” for the Facebook photos varied by the photo and number of people in the photo. The marketing and communication office staff also felt the assignment had a positive impact on engagement for the Facebook account. (R. Post, personal communication, March 11, 2014). See Figure 4 for the caption on the Facebook photo album (Facebook, 2014). Incentives like shorts, shirts, and other items from the campus bookstore, were initially given out to encourage comments on the photos.

## **3. Student Feedback**

The qualitative comments from the students indicate that the transfer of learning did take place. Various student comments are listed below.

“I thought the activity was good because it made us as students more aware of the various activities around campus as well as linking the campus together through social media creating more of a community feeling. I would recommend the activity because it was a great thing not only for the class but for the school as a whole.”

“It (Tagged) allowed more pictures of events to be taken and people to participate in the college’s social media”.

“It was an enjoyable project with relevant information directed toward a marketing emphasis. Practical application of lessons learned”.

“I think it is important to understand the impact social media can have”.

“I think it was a very good project that gave relevant experience.”

“I thought that the tagged assignment was a great assignment for a few reasons. One, it promoted the students of the class to go to events that they would not normally attend. This is beneficial because it stimulates a wide range of interests at the college and makes the campus a more active place. Two, it allowed students and faculty to connect social media sites and raised awareness for events happening at the college. Finally, I thought the assignment raised campus interest as a whole in a great number of events.”

“With the tagged assignment there was a picture of basically every event that happened on campus during that class. This allowed students to connect and see the unique experience that is offered to us here at the college being a smaller school.”

#### 4. Conclusion

The Tagged activity focused on student learning through active marketing engagement for a client. This assignment allowed students to see the impact of their efforts in a real social media marketing environment. Tagged created a powerful learning experience for students, and at the same time, the college/university benefited by having relevant marketing content generated from the students’ perspective. This was an activity that could be duplicated at any college or university where there is a positive working relationship with the marketing office/department. The assignment provide defective learning for students and engaged marketing strategy for the college/university, all while providing fun in the classroom. Ultimately, Tagged was a win win for everyone participating.

#### 5. Appendix

Figure 1, Informational Handout

### Tag, You Are It!

Your picture was taken by a student at “College Name”. We want to encourage you to view the picture in one of three places and “Tag” yourself in the picture if you have a Facebook or Instagram account. If you have questions about this photograph please contact the course professor “Professor Name” #####phone number. Pictures will be posted on Tuesday’s to one or more of these locations:



**Twitter** [@collegename](#) [#collegename](#)



**Facebook** [www.facebook.com/collegename](http://www.facebook.com/collegename) (In Photo Album “Tag, You are It!”)



**Instagram** [@collegename](#) [#collegename](#)

Figure 2: Likes Received on Instagram

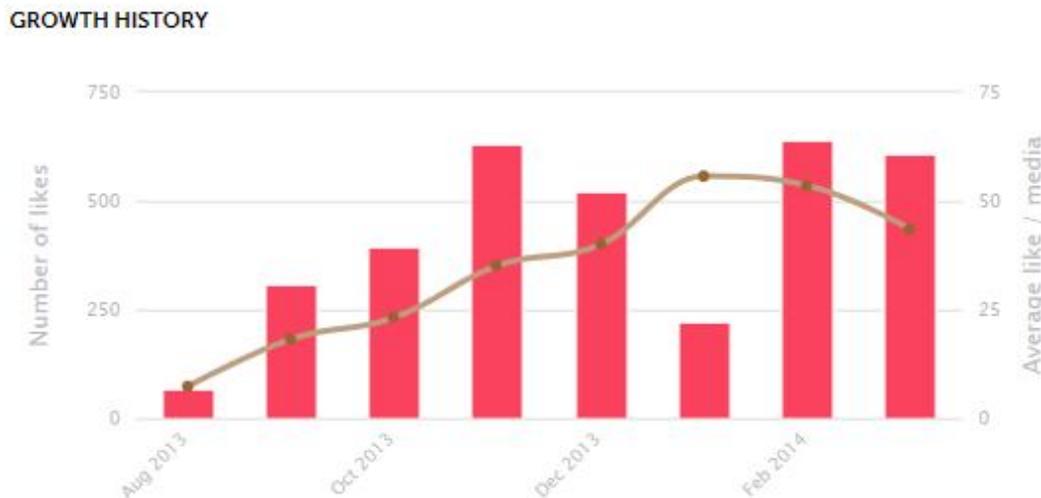
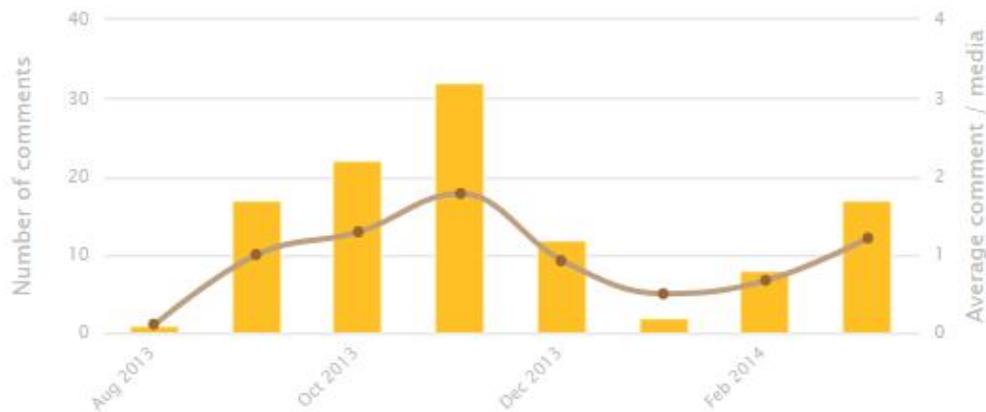


Figure 3: Comments Received on Instagram Photos

GROWTH HISTORY



**Figure 4: Facebook Tagged Photo Album Caption**

Join the fun on "Tagged Tuesday!" We'll add new pictures from our student photographers every Tuesday during the fall semester. Like, comment, share and tag yourself and your friends and you'll be entered to win | swag! #TAGGED

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