

Staying on trend: Research dives into aligning social media skills development to industry expectations

April 23 2024, by Adam Pope



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New research from the University of Alabama at Birmingham's Collat School of Business is revealing how college students grasp social media

marketing concepts, and what industry leaders are looking for when they enter the workforce.

Teaching social media marketing presents unique challenges, according to lead author Nicole Beachum, Ph.D., assistant professor in the UAB Department of Marketing, Industrial Distribution and Economics. The field is ever-changing, demanding professors to keep pace with evolving platforms, algorithms and tools. Balancing class preparation, research and other job responsibilities adds to the complexity of effective teaching in this dynamic domain.

One challenge, Beachum says, is that social media courses may require frequent material updates each semester.

"The landscape itself changes so quickly that it's even hard for people who work full time in the industry to keep up," Beachum said. "From the emergence of new social media platforms to the numerous changes to each social media platform, change is one of the only constant aspects of digital marketing."

The study, published in the [*Journal of Marketing Education*](#), found that meta skills are still incredibly important for students. The study also makes the case that client-based projects drastically enhance meta-skill acquisition among [undergraduate students](#) compared to simulations alone.

"Even if a person has technical experience in social media marketing, it is still essential that they are good communicators, have time management skills, enjoy learning, etc.," Beachum said. "As with many jobs, simply having the [technical skills](#) is not sufficient in being a part of a team and being able to communicate effectively with teammates, clients and customers."

Beachum says students are often more up to date on the actual new and upcoming social media platforms than their professors, which can be an interesting dynamic.

"A professor isn't going to just go in and teach 'what is Instagram' to students who are already completely familiar with the [platform](#)," Beachum said. "Instead, they have to be able to explain—and understand themselves—how different marketing and advertising on Instagram for a company is compared to using it personally."

Beachum adds that the research indicates professors should understand and effectively explain the advertising dashboards, providing students with access to these tools and analytics within the classroom.

The study also utilized interviews from marketing managers to find out what they want from new social media marketing graduates. The goal was to understand the skills graduates need for the job market. Additionally, the study explored how classroom assessments are seen by hiring managers.

Among the feedback, it was recommended that students need guidance in articulating their learning experiences, especially from simulations, in resumes, portfolios and interviews, adding that encouraging the capture of simulation content and reflection papers can aid in communicating their skills and value effectively.

Other feedback included that video content creation and editing skills are increasingly essential in the job market. Basic knowledge of HTML, content management platforms and search engine optimization, or SEO, provides a competitive edge. Integrating these topics into the curriculum enhances students' marketability.

More information: Nicole Beachum et al, Simulations or Client Projects? Aligning Social Media Skills Development to Industry Expectations, *Journal of Marketing Education* (2023). [DOI: 10.1177/02734753231152156](https://doi.org/10.1177/02734753231152156)

Provided by University of Alabama at Birmingham

Citation: Staying on trend: Research dives into aligning social media skills development to industry expectations (2024, April 23) retrieved 4 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-04-staying-trend-aligning-social-media.html>

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