Description

The onset of the “social media” revolution was recognized about 15 years ago when Friendster was created as a means by which people with similar interests could interact online. This prompted other social networking sites such as LinkedIn that was created in 2003 and geared more toward the business community. LinkedIn boasts approximately 297 million members and remains a high-profile site in which members can post resumes, blog about specific subjects, and connect with colleagues.

Within this timeframe, MySpace was created and, for a long time, was the only social network of its kind that offered music, videos, and catered to a younger generation. Although MySpace still exists mainly as a networking forum for musicians, Facebook, which was launched in 2007, has now become more popular. Facebook was the first to allow other applications to interface with it, making it a huge success. At nearly the same time, Twitter was introduced and has realized much the same popularity as Facebook. More businesses also use social media to promote their products, and some sites allow its members to create their own “pages” to focus on a specific interest or group.

So how can these social networks help researchers? What advantages do they have for scientists who are looking for information in their fields of study or even for academic research grants to fund their research?

Scientists and Social Media

Scientists are realizing that social media platforms are great tools for connecting with those who share their interests, yet they might not be taking full advantage of what they have to offer. Although most are familiar with and regularly use sites such as ResearchGate and Academia.edu, both of which launched in 2008 to help bridge the gap in communication and aid collaboration among research scientists, some are becoming more familiar with other social media sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, and consider them as a means to reach a wider audience. In addition, as funding for science becomes more limited, fundraising activities will play a big role in scientific research. For example, FiatPhysica was created as a forum to help researchers build their own fundraising campaigns.

In 2013–14, Collins et al.[1] surveyed 587 research scientists, mainly life science academicians, from 31 countries to assess their use of social media. The respondents believed that using social media helped raise awareness and excitement about science, which also helped raise funds for their projects. They found it especially helpful for exchanging knowledge with colleagues worldwide in a timely manner—much faster than having to wait until a research paper is published to receive feedback, which can take years.

The study also found that, although more than 50% of those responding used social media, a large proportion of them (78%) were between the ages of 21 and 39, and the dominant sites used were Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn, with Twitter used the most. Other sites, such as ResearchGate, Instagram, and Pinterest, were also mentioned but used much less often. The high percentage of users being within the younger age range suggested that they tended to rely on social media to share information and collaborate with colleagues more than those in the older age groups, and it appeared as though some older researchers didn’t necessarily understand what social media is or has to offer. In

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addition, participants estimated that only about 22% of their colleagues used Twitter (again, because of the lack of understanding), and many admitted to having a Twitter account for less than two years.

It is, therefore, clear from the survey results that majority of scientists have not yet discovered the advantages of using social media or are not using it enough. Should they step away from the lab bench and be more engaged with others in their field? Is social media a means by which scientists can solicit funding?

Changing Trends in Communication Among Scientists

The good news is that scientists are now beginning to realize that social media is more than just a means by which to present information to others. It is two-way communication that helps researchers gain up-to-date information in their field and stay in contact with colleagues. According to Karyn Traphagen, executive director of ScienceOnline, “Social media is a great equalizer.” She claims that Twitter is the number one arena for the ScienceOnline community, and that it can provide information on conferences and presentations, provide a connection to colleagues who share your research interests, or even present conference slides and videos.

According to Jonathan Jacobs of MRI Global, Twitter is a great resource to learn about important research papers “even before they are released,” and he uses Twitter to follow science conferences and receive information nearly as effectively as “actually attending” the presentations, which supports the potential for presenters to reach a wider audience and possibly attract funding interests.

Tips to Further Your Career

According to Karen Peterson, Director of Scientific Career Development at Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center; researchers simply must establish an online presence to help further their careers. Sean Ekins has five tips in the form of social media recommendations and instructions to help further your career, the top being to use Twitter, followed by LinkedIn, SlideShare, Figshare, and Kudos.

So, step away from your lab bench and join the online network of colleagues. You’ll find it very helpful in your research and for your career.

Reference:

1. Kimberley Collins, David Shiffman, Jenny Rock (2016, October 12) *How Are Scientists Using Social Media in the Workplace?* Retrieved from https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0162680

Category

1. Promoting Research
2. Using Online Media

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