

12-31-2014

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Recommended Citation

Abbott, Annie (2014) "Incorporating New Areas of Business into Business Language Studies: Social Media Marketing," *Global Business Languages*: Vol. 19 , Article 6.

Available at: <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/gbl/vol19/iss1/6>

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INCORPORATING NEW AREAS OF BUSINESS INTO BUSINESS LANGUAGE STUDIES: SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING

ABSTRACT

Despite the fact that social media marketing has established itself as a vital area of marketing for businesses both large and small, global and local, Business Language Studies (BLS) has yet to turn its full attention to this business activity that requires a keen sense of language, culture, and business. As BLS continues to build and articulate its theoretical and methodological grounds, social media marketing provides rich research and teaching possibilities. However, social media is a dynamic, constantly changing environment that can seem intimidating to BLS educators who are unfamiliar with its platforms and uses. This article serves as an introduction to social media marketing on a few levels. First, it presents definitions and examples of social media and social media marketing. Secondly, it provides an overview of the scarce but important literature on social media marketing. And finally, by using Radio Ambulante as a case study, it focuses on discrete elements of a social media marketing strategy as exemplified in their own social media marketing channels. With examples and resources at hand, perhaps more BLS educators will turn their attention to the linguistic and cultural issues within social media marketing.

KEYWORDS: Business Language Studies (BLS), social media, social media marketing, Languages for Specific Purposes (LSP), Spanish

INTRODUCTION

Radio Ambulante tells stories. The program's podcasts consist of finely crafted journalistic stories in the tradition of Latin American *crónicas*. In its own words, "Radio Ambulante is a Spanish-language radio program that tells Latin American stories from anywhere Spanish is spoken, including the United States" (About, 2015). Radio Ambulante is often called "*This American Life* in Spanish" because its high-quality storytelling techniques rival those of the popular National Public Radio show, but are narrated in Spanish. One of the founders, Daniel Alarcón, is also an increasingly well-known US Latino author whose "literary and radio productions work in tandem to

minimize the distances created across borders and emphasize stories linking humanity” (Moreno & Anderson, 2014, p. 1). As a nonprofit start-up, Radio Ambulante financed its launch through a successful crowdfunding campaign on Kickstarter, raising over \$46,000 within just two months (Radio Ambulante, 2012). While the radio program is of interest simply for its cultural content, for Business Language Studies (BLS) Radio Ambulante reflects a new area of analysis and teaching: social media marketing. Its immediate and continued success—in 2014 it was awarded the Gabriel García Márquez Journalism Prize for Innovation—relies, in part, on its ability to connect to a global, online audience of Spanish-speakers through social media. As social media marketing and e-commerce grow in importance for all enterprises, from multinationals to local small businesses, BLS should turn its attention to the roles of languages and cultures in these activities. In fact, in Michael Scott Doyle’s (2012) outline of BLS theory, social media fits within the discourse-type-restricted rubric, and social media marketing falls under the problem-restricted rubric (p. 110).

Social media marketing involves the use of Web 2.0 tools, including social networking sites, to increase the awareness of an enterprise’s brand, products, and services. For example, a business might maintain a blog about trends in its field, share tips on Twitter, announce special promotions on Facebook, and post pictures of new products on Instagram. While popular social media platforms might come and go, the underlying marketing principles remain the same, including the importance of a marketing strategy and implementation that is linguistically and culturally appropriate. Therefore, BLS is uniquely poised to bring together the unique but interrelated issues of business, languages, and cultures that social media marketing integrates. We cannot assume that social media marketing does not need to be taught because today’s young people already know how to use social media. Students are not always as technologically competent as the term “digital native” implies. A recent study, albeit of middle school students and teachers, found that “School-age students may be fluent in using entertainment or communication technologies, but there is evidence that guidance is needed to support their learning how to use these technologies to solve sophisticated cognitive problems” (Wang, Hsu, Campbell, Coster, & Longhurst, 2014). For these reasons, social media marketing is a good fit for BLS.

However, few if any BLS publications have focused on social media marketing. Tilman Schröder asserts that “[a] review of the recent literature from the field ... reveals that Web genres have received less attention than

traditional genres, despite their rise over the past decade” (2012, p. 137). Although Schröder’s article goes on to focus solely on websites, social media is an increasingly important digital genre. Furthermore, much of the BLS literature already provides frameworks that can easily be applied to social media marketing. Several articles in the previous issue of *Global Business Languages* provide examples. The connections that Deb S. Reisinger (2013) articulates between BLS and recent national policy changes in language education emphasize social and cross-cultural skills, information literacy, and digital literacy—all key elements to understanding social media marketing across languages and cultures. Félix S. Vásquez contrasts academic and business writing styles “so that language instructors teaching business courses in departments of modern languages can better prepare students for the needs of the twenty-first-century workplace” (2013, p. 97). Indeed, analyzing and creating both written and visual content for social media marketing certainly requires different skills than the traditional academic essay. Per Urlaub (2013) describes how to foster critical thinking and intercultural competence in BLS students by asking them to generate questions based on business-related readings; the same could be done with a Twitter feed, a Facebook page, or even the visual content of a YouTube channel or Pinterest board. All in all, it is apparent that BLS is already well equipped to integrate social media and social media marketing into its theory, methods, and methodology.

The research on social media marketing is new and relatively scarce. As social media marketing emerged, many scholarly articles primarily focused on framing the questions and research methods (Chan & Ngai, 2011; Bayer & Servan-Schreiber, 2011; Lutz, 2011). Research on specific social media marketing practices included topics such as the effects of revealing or hiding the information of a brand’s online supporters (Walker Naylor, 2012), how to handle negative social media information (van Laer & de Ruyter, 2010), whether or not to combine social media marketing with traditional media marketing (Onishi & Manchanda, 2012), the uses of social coupons (Kumar & Rajan, 2012), and the ability to measure social media marketing’s return on investment (Dzamic, 2012), to name just a few. Professional, non-academic publications highlighted interviews with practicing professionals using social media marketing successfully (Wyner, 2012), best practices that cut across all marketing platforms—such as focusing marketing messages on the customer benefits (Flint, 2012)—and guides for specific platforms or for an overarching social media marketing strategy. The literature on global branding, while often pertinent to social media marketing (Torelli, Özsomer, Carvalho, Keh,

& Maehle, 2012; Bishop & Peterson, 2010), rarely focused on social media marketing itself. By now, however, the pace of this kind of published research has accelerated. In 2014, almost every issue of *Journal of Marketing*, for example, has at least one article based on social media marketing.

In sum, the existing literature provides a base upon which BLS researchers can build, especially with a focus on linguistically and culturally appropriate social media marketing in global business as well as local business within multicultural settings. There is also a strong foundation of BLS curricular materials upon which to base social media marketing education. Although today's BLS students are certainly adept at social media, they still need instruction on marketing concepts and how to produce—not just consume—online content. By combining marketing and social media, BLS can contribute to creating future professionals with expertise in social media marketing that is translingual and transcultural. The rest of this essay provides social media marketing examples from one small enterprise with a global reach: Radio Ambulante. Each example focuses on one element of a marketing strategy within a specific social media platform. For BLS educators who are new to social media marketing, choosing just one element of a social media marketing strategy and one single platform can be a good starting point.

IDENTIFY IDEAL CUSTOMERS: WEBSITE AND BLOG

A fundamental element of any kind of marketing effort is to thoroughly understand the target market. Moreover, many experts encourage organizations to create a detailed profile of their ideal customer, including precise demographics, habits, and interests, even giving that “persona” a name. By creating and using a very precise profile, marketers are more adept at crafting messages that resonate with the ideal customer and that actually reach them. For example, knowing what magazines the ideal client reads, marketers know where to advertise; determining his or her age range, marketers know which roles (parenthood, empty-nest syndrome, caring for aging parents, etc.) to highlight in their content; understanding his or her values, marketers know which cause marketing campaigns should consider (for example, Yoplait's support of the foundation focused on breast cancer awareness and research: Susan G. Komen for the Cure).

Looking at Radio Ambulante's website—still considered to be the foundation of any social media marketing strategy—we have many clues about its ideal user. The main URL (<http://radioambulante.org/>) leads directly to the Spanish-language version of the website. From there, users can toggle to an

English version (<http://radioambulante.org/en/#>). In essence, the website is totally bilingual, but the default position is for Spanish-speakers. Furthermore, the Radio Ambulante logo, a male figure carting a large radio, reflects the iconic image of a Latin American street vendor, pushing his wares and shouting out to potential customers. In contrast, this is a comprehensible but not necessarily culturally relevant image for people from English-speaking countries and cultures. Again, this shows that Radio Ambulante's ideal user is a Spanish-speaker (monolingual or bilingual), though they do not exclude monolingual English speakers who can certainly identify the large, vintage-style radio of the logo. The male in the logo is "*ambulante*," like the global audience of Spanish-speakers the podcast series addresses with numerous stories centered on immigrants. Nostalgia also emerges as a theme. The vintage radio reflects the past and the cultural practice of radio-based storytelling, with families or entire communities gathered around the radio to listen to those stories. Radio Ambulante successfully ties together the old—nostalgia for a bygone time and place (Latin America)—and the new—the latest in digital technology, podcasting, and audio-based social media sites.

Blogs, unlike websites, are a social media platform allowing interaction through comments. Like websites, though, blogs are also a cornerstone for any social media marketing strategy because they provide a permanent record of posts that is searchable through Internet search engines. Radio Ambulante's website includes a blog. Its blog posts reflect the language(s) and interests of its target market. The posts also point toward a common social media marketing strategy for blogs: to deliver insider and extra content that provides additional value to a brand's products, services, and experiences.

Radio Ambulante's blog uses several categories of posts to provide added value to their main product: podcasts. First, they share news about the organization itself. In one post, they celebrate Radio Ambulante's winning the Gabriel García Márquez Award and include a picture to give the reader an up-close experience of the award ceremony. Another post announces the launch of its offshoot series of podcasts, "Unscripted," which still tells stories about Latin Americans, but in English: "The idea is to have engaging, challenging, funny conversations with artists, writers, journalists, filmmakers, scientists, and activists from all over Latin America and the US" (Radio Ambulante: Unscripted, 2014). Secondly, they include blog posts that reveal the behind-the-scenes stories of the podcasts. One "Detrás de la escena" post includes a short audio file with out-takes and bloopers from a regular episode, "Caminata Nocturna." On a more serious note, a different behind-the-scenes blog

post explains how the journalist who created the podcast episode “Nohemí” came across the story and provides links to further information. Providing extra, complementary information is a third category of blog posts that Radio Ambulante uses. As a follow-up to its episode about “los frikis” in Cuba, Radio Ambulante posted YouTube videos with the full-length versions of the songs it featured in the podcast. In response to listener interest, it supplied the audio of the full-length version of a song sung at the end its episode entitled “La Concursante” (Extra: Basta carajo, 2014). To give more weight to a controversial story, it posted the data used by a mathematician to back up the protagonist’s version of events (Las cifras, 2014). Finally, it includes blog posts that foster a more personal, intimate connection with the disconnected voices of the podcasts: Daniel Alarcón, the podcast’s founder, is featured in a video explaining the vision of Radio Ambulante; he speaks directly to listeners, “Queridos Amigos de Radio Ambulante,” in a holiday-themed post; and one post features an interview with the journalist who wrote one of the award-winning podcasts. All in all, Radio Ambulante’s website and blog mirror the ideal user’s profile and provide it valuable, enjoyable extra content.

CREATE A CONTENT STRATEGY: FACEBOOK

Unlike advertisements, content marketing focuses on creating and sharing information that customers and potential customers value. A high-tech company might offer a free white paper on their blog that analyzes industry trends. A private bilingual school could create an eye-catching infographic about the benefits of bilingualism and share it on several social media platforms. A blender company is noted for its entertaining and highly viewed YouTube videos called “Will It Blend?” (<http://www.willitblend.com/>), which blend such items as hearing aids, golf clubs, and cell phones. What these disparate examples have in common is content marketing. Ann Handley and C. C. Chapman (2012) explain that “Content is a broad term that refers to anything created and uploaded to a website: the words, images, tools and other things that reside there” (p. 6). Content marketing, then, is the creation of content that provides users with information that they value and that facilitates their interaction with the organization’s brand. There are many forms of content, and each organization must have a strategy for what information it will and will not share with its audience (Handley & Chapman, 2012).

From Radio Ambulante’s Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/radioambulante>) it is possible to infer, at least in part, the organization’s content strategy. To begin, it creates brand consistency in several ways. The

cover photo reuses the Radio Ambulante logo, but with the slight change of placing it upon a light blue background with a map of the Americas, thus reinforcing its target audience of global Spanish-speakers. Although it has used several profile pictures, all feature the logo. In 2014 its profile photo announces a live Radio Ambulante event and features a graphic design style that is similar to the logo. The description provided in the “About” tab is a variation on the website’s information, and it is offered first in Spanish and then in English. The Facebook page includes important elements that reinforce Radio Ambulante’s branding yet take advantage of the specific uses and features of Facebook.

Part of any content strategy is deciding which forms of content to use. Radio Ambulante takes advantage of all the forms provided on the Facebook platform: links, photos, videos, events, and text. Sound files cannot be directly uploaded to Facebook—unlike MySpace, for example—so Radio Ambulante shares their podcast episodes through links to the sound files on their website. They also provide direct access and subscription services to their podcasts through several sources, including the iTunes store and SoundCloud, an audio-sharing social media site. Links are a frequent form of content on its page, which highlights events, interviews, and awards related to Radio Ambulante and its team, giving the user the impression of a high-quality organization that is well-connected in the literary and creative worlds of both the US and Latin America. The images it uploads are both original (behind-the-scenes photos from the episodes, personal photos of team members) and from other sources. Facebook allows users to create an “event,” and Radio Ambulante uses this to promote its speaking events. In terms of video, Radio Ambulante appears to link to its videos from other sources instead of uploading them directly to Facebook, but in general it is clear that it takes full advantage of all the forms of content that Facebook allows.

In addition to the variety of forms that content can take, its voice, or tone, can vary widely—from scholarly to silly. Reading through Radio Ambulante’s Facebook posts, the tone tends to be professional, personable, and informative. While its podcasts are creative, with voice-overs that are at times even poetic, its Facebook posts tend to be short and direct. For example, although an image shared was highly creative—an artist’s cartoonlike portrait of Daniel Alarcón—the words of the post were prosaic: “How cool is this drawing by Dan Carino of Daniel speaking at this year’s Third Coast Conference in Chicago? /// Qué chévere es este dibujo de Daniel hablando sobre Radio Ambulante durante la conferencia de Third Coast en Chicago. ¡Gracias a Dan Carino por compartir!”

A content marketing strategy should also determine the frequency with which to post. For this, platforms have their own (unwritten) norms. On Twitter, for example, it is acceptable to post every day, even several times a day. LinkedIn users, on the opposite side of the spectrum, tend to post less frequently and only about topics that directly or indirectly relate to professional concerns. Facebook falls between those two extremes. Radio Ambulante maintains a frequent, though not consistent, rhythm. At times, a few days lapse between postings. Normally, it posts once each day but occasionally shares several posts on a single day. It posts frequently enough to show that it is an active organization but not so much that it annoys its audience.

Finally, an analysis of the level of audience engagement with Radio Ambulante's Facebook page reveals that although it does many things well in its Facebook marketing, there is room for improvement. In the fall of 2014, Radio Ambulante's Facebook page had 9,025 likes. Nonetheless, the number of likes and comments on its recent posts is relatively low. One tactic used frequently in social media marketing is to pose questions or challenges directly to the audience in a Facebook post. Radio Ambulante rarely does this. Simple questions or commands added to the end of its existing posts can increase engagement: "How many stars would you give this new episode?"; "Tell us in the comments below if you have ever had an experience similar to the protagonist's in this episode"; or "Click like if you are a subscriber to our podcast." Higher levels of audience engagement can provide Radio Ambulante with valuable feedback, and it can increase the likelihood that Radio Ambulante's posts will appear in its audience's feed. Increased brand awareness, after all, is what marketing is about.

CHOOSE CHANNELS AND TACTICS: PINTEREST AND TWITTER

Choosing specific social media platforms is not the first step in creating a social media marketing strategy. Some fundamental business and marketing decisions need to be made before choosing the relevant sites. In fact, an established and authoritative blog on social media marketing, the Social Media Examiner, lists eight essential elements of a social media marketing strategy in chronological order; choosing the appropriate channels is number five (Daoud, 2014). If an ideal customer profile is not established first, it is impossible to know which social media platforms customers use and consequently where the message will find them. Without first establishing business goals, one cannot know whether to focus on increasing brand awareness or retaining current customers. Different goals might be best achieved on dif-

ferent platforms. For example, a restaurant that is under new management might determine that its primary goal is to improve its brand's tarnished image from mistakes made under the previous management. A two-pronged social media marketing strategy could help. First, it could use Facebook (if that is a platform their customers and potential customers use) to provide a steady stream of new, positive images to replace the old, negative ones. Secondly, it might decide to invest substantial time and effort on Yelp (a site where people rate and write reviews of local businesses), reaching out to users who left negative customer reviews in order to repair ties with past customers and encourage new, positive customer reviews.

Because it is impossible, and probably unnecessary, to maintain a presence on all the growing number of social media platforms, Radio Ambulante appears to have made some important decisions about which channels to use. It has an account on Pinterest (<http://www.pinterest.com/radioambulante/>), a popular site for organizing and sharing visual bookmarks, but it has not always been updated. Still, its account reveals the same care with branding that appears in all the platforms it uses. It reuses the Radio Ambulante logo in its Pinterest profile picture. The description of the organization, although shorter, echoes that of the website and Facebook page and is written in Spanish first and English second.

On Pinterest, individual visual bookmarks, or "pins," are organized into boards. Radio Ambulante's boards reveal some of the same social media marketing techniques it uses on its blog and Facebook page. Several boards have bilingual titles (Episodes/Episodios, Politics/Política, Milagros/Miracles), and the content reflects the interests and values of the ideal user. Within the board "Episodes/Episodios," each pin links back to a Radio Ambulante episode. However, only the earliest episodes are pinned to this board, suggesting that it has decreased or abandoned its use of Pinterest. Other boards show the same lack of recent activity but still convey a consistent brand message. The board entitled "Milagros" contains pins that visually reinforce the message of the podcast with the same title. The organization's values are reflected in the board "Politics/Política." Whereas most companies would avoid political posts in an effort not to alienate potential customers, the pro-immigration pins on its board reinforce the stories it tells about Latin American immigrants. The pictures of old radios and famous Latin American radio hosts in the "Radio Vintage" board reflects the theme of nostalgia seen in Radio Ambulante's logo, and its attention to creativity and art in narrative formats is paralleled in the "Art" board.

There is also a board with pins of podcasts of other shows (*Radiolab*, *This American Life*, *On the Media*). Instead of ignoring the competition, Radio Ambulante positions itself as part of a community of high-quality podcasts.

Obviously, a social media marketing strategy led Radio Ambulante away from Pinterest, but by its high level of activity on Twitter (<https://twitter.com/radioambulante>) it is clear that it has chosen to invest in this channel. Social media marketing is, indeed, an investment. Although social media and mobile devices have made these platforms seemingly ubiquitous, that does not make social media marketing easy. Furthermore, just because information on social media is consumed and shared quickly, sometimes immediately, producing high-quality, targeted posts takes time. A good social media marketing strategy requires a budget, resources, and dedicated personnel. On its website, Radio Ambulante lists the members of its team, including a social media coordinator. High activity levels on several social media platforms convey the high importance it has given the role on its team.

Organizations that invest in social media marketing need to know if the investment is worth it. While some marketers tally the number of likes, comments, and shares on their posts to measure impact, the real question is whether or not social media marketing has helped the organization reach its business goals. If the goal is to increase brand awareness, then the number of new Facebook page likes each month would be a relevant measure. However, if an organization is focused on increasing the number of purchases from current customers, it would be more appropriate to identify how many clicks a Facebook link to their online catalog produces. Another business goal, reducing marketing costs, can be measured by comparing how many sales were generated on social media versus other marketing formats.

Radio Ambulante appears to use Twitter to meet several business goals. First, the frequency and high quality of its tweets serves to keep Radio Ambulante present in the Twitter feed and in the minds of its followers. The topics of the tweets and retweets range rather widely (Latin American current events, immigration, immigration reform, US Latino writers, Latin American artists, journalistic essays), but they all pertain to the Latin American storytelling that is the essence of the organization. The tweets situate Radio Ambulante's podcasts within the larger context of cultural production in and about Latin America. Additionally, by using clear, specific calls to action, Radio Ambulante urges its followers to become actual consumers of its information. Along with the pertinent links, the tweets use active verbs to direct the reader to do things like download podcasts, respond to an event, click on links about its

speaking engagements or listen to the latest release. By aligning the choice of social media channels with its business goals, Radio Ambulante has reduced efforts on Pinterest and concentrated on Twitter and Facebook. As a matter of fact, its website features the icons of Facebook and Twitter with clickable links, not Pinterest.

CONCLUSIONS

As this analysis of Radio Ambulante shows, BLS researchers and educators can examine social media marketing with the same approach the field brings to any area of business: by making connections among languages, cultures, and business. In fact, BLS should engage in this emerging and increasingly important area of business. We cannot assume that students who are “digital natives” already know how to engage in social media marketing just because they are adept at using social media. Furthermore, by involving students in the analysis of social media marketing in Spanish, they can actually interact with enterprises through social media channels. It is challenging to teach cultural “perspectives,” not just products and practices, but the dynamic and participatory nature of social media marketing can help students see business from other perspectives. The possibilities for research projects involving social media marketing are myriad. It is possible to compare the linguistic features in the social media marketing of different brands, study different cultures’ approaches to encouraging customer participation, and many other topics. Even BLS educators who are not entirely comfortable on social media platforms themselves can work collaboratively with students, sharing their expertise in business, languages, and cultures while learning about social media from the students. It is not necessary to be a social media marketer to incorporate it into one’s teaching repertoire, nor is it necessary to be familiar with all social media channels. One will suffice.

Business Language Studies has a strong foundation in the teaching and analysis of language, culture, and business. What we need is to push forward into new business realms of the knowledge and information economy, like social media marketing, that also require the knowledge of language, culture, and business. Radio Ambulante’s podcasts share stories in Spanish, yet its social media marketing tells its brand’s story in English and Spanish and across multiple platforms. BLS can also broaden its range of subjects to represent today’s global and multilingual social media marketing landscape.

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