

Social Media Academy Concluding Report

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“Many of us had to come out of our comfort zones to face that social media plays an important role in our work lives and figure out a way to use it all effectively.” --Dina Yakar, Solomon Schechter of Long Island

“We began this academy with some reservation about reaching out to our students via social media, but we complete this academy with a bigger picture, one that will allow us to recognize the need for social media, yet allow it to fit into the context of the morals of our yeshiva.” --Elly Storch and Jeff Rothman, HALB/SKA/DRS

The first set of social media experiments supported by the Avi Chai Foundation has concluded. This report will reflect on these efforts and provide recommendations for moving forward.

Nine schools participated in the Social Media Academy, which made them eligible to participate in the Causes match challenge and data enhancement efforts. The final social media experiment, the video contest, is being managed by See3 Communications.

The goals for the experiments were to:

- Develop a trusted and tested training program for day school staff to embed and enhance network-weaving expertise at the individual institutional level;
- Enable individual institutions to update their alumni databases and greatly expand their online outreach to alumni and related stakeholders for fundraising and community development;
- Nurture the latent capabilities of the current generation of students and young alumni as powerful creators and sharers of messages aimed at building the tribe of people committed to Jewish day schools.

The participating schools were: Westchester Hebrew High School, SAR High School, SKA/HALB High School, Rae Kushner Yeshiva High School, Solomon Schechter School of Westchester, Mesivta Ateres Yaakov, SSDS of Nassau County and SSHS of Long Island, and Yeshivas Ohr Yosef. The Yeshiva University High School was originally going to include both the boys and girls schools, but the boy's school had difficulty making staff available for the program and withdrew.

Three all-day workshops were facilitated by Lisa Colton of Darim Online, the first two in March and the third in May. In attendance at the workshops were all of the school participants, the coaches from Big Duck, the two of us, and representatives of the Avi Chai foundation. The first workshop provided an overview of social media to the participants with more specific tutorials on Facebook and Twitter. The second workshop covered blogging and social media measurement and policies. The schools were also introduced to their coaches during that workshop. The third workshop focused on fundraising and storytelling. Michael Hoffman donated his time in the afternoon to do an overview on the creation and distribution of video. We also introduced the Causes match program and the list development grants at this workshop. The schools again met with their coaches during this session to discuss the Causes campaign and their other projects.

The last in-person workshop was on May 5th. Since that time the schools have participated in a series of online webinars and share-fests and interacted on an ongoing basis with their individual coaches. In addition, Darim launched a Facebook group for the Academy participants, which has been used as a vehicle for sharing general information about social media, for reminders of upcoming events, and during the Causes campaign for participants to ask and answer questions and help one another. An in-

person graduation was held at the Foundation on September 21st to allow participants to celebrate and share lessons with one another.

Information and data for this report come from written reports from the schools, the coaches, Darim, and our own interviews with participants after the Academy since the graduation.

This report provides reflections on the effort to build social media capacity with the schools to date. It will also provide recommendations for continuing to support this first cohort of schools, as well as suggestions for the next Social Media Academy.

First Academy Reflections

It is challenging to draw firm conclusions from the just completed first Academy because of the small cohort of schools involved, along with their disparate capacity and readiness to participate in the experiments. Nonetheless, certain patterns were clear across the schools that give us an immediate impression of what worked, what didn't and what can be improved for future Academies.

Day school culture is just starting to find its social media comfort level. All of the participants expressed some level of anxiety about using social media within and without their schools. As one participant said, "If I hadn't done this class, the conversation internally would be much different. I'd be much more skeptical. I now see tremendous value in leveraging these networks the right way for our school." Another participant who was very concerned about the mores of social media at the beginning of the Academy wrote in his final report, "We complete this academy with a bigger picture, one that will allow us to recognize the need for social media, yet allow it to fit into the context of the morals of our yeshiva." Still a third said, "Guidelines need to be set, which might make people less wary. It's slow going but we're working on it."

Several participants mentioned that an added benefit of the Causes campaign was forcing school administrators to experience networked thinking and fundraising in a real, rather than theoretical, way.

School staffs are stretched. All of the schools have staffs stretched to the breaking point. Even staffs of larger schools wear multiple hats and work within systems and cultures with little time for planning and reflection. This creates cultures within the schools of being reactive, always on the edge of crisis financially and programmatically, always running behind because of the rigors of running schools with so little infrastructure. One indicator of how stretched staff are is that only two schools took full advantage of all the coaching hours, although all of them were very enthusiastic about their individual coaches and the work they did together – and wished they had more time to spend together. In addition, few schools took advantage of the open office hours Darim hosted online. The schools expressed regret at not being able to take full advantage of these resources.

The size of the school is not a determining factor of success. One very small school did very well in the Academy. They increased their list of alumni significantly, did very well in the Causes fundraiser, created a lively Facebook page, and, perhaps most importantly, stretched their willingness to take risks publicly. Some of the larger schools struggled, primarily because their cultures are built on broadcast rather than conversational modes and their need for control.

Readiness is an ongoing challenge. None of the participating schools had social media policies at the beginning of the Academy. Several were living in a Web 1.0 world with their websites and email programs. These factors, plus resistance from heads of schools, contributed to the difficulty some schools had in plunging into the Academy initially. We can help schools engage more readily in the future by screening for readiness and providing materials in advance such as readings and viewing explanatory videos.

Schools need to focus first on culture change, then tools. Most of the coaching time was spent discussing ways to overcome organizational apprehension of social media, as opposed to particular social media tools or tactics. This was neither surprising nor detrimental. Academy participants learned to develop strategies for engaging heads of schools, and evolved policies for addressing the fears of taking the walls down even further. One participant recalled, “Knowing full well that the success of such a venture would require the backing of our educational institution’s administrative personnel, our immediate focus turned from content development to strategic planning.” From the plans and strategies the schools developed, they were then able to focus on which social media channels were best suited to their needs. LinkedIn and Twitter were particularly popular tools, along with the schools’ own websites and email. Diving in and using social media around the Causes campaign was also helpful in showing school stakeholders why this approach had merit. Another participant noted, “It also sent the message that everybody counts, whether you’re on scholarship or not. It also sent a message to our big donors that we’re going to go after any money that’s available to us.”

Staff turnover is endemic in day schools. Turnover of administrative staff is a constant activity in the schools. It is inevitable that some participants will leave during or immediately after an effort like this. We can invite more participants from schools to the Academy as suggested below, however, this is simply a part of life with day schools and the best defense against the turnover is to make sure the schools create social media policies, insist that plans are written and shared.

There is an upside to frequent staff turnover, which is the opportunity to hire new staff conversant and comfortable with social media who can help move this agenda forward.

Alumni and parents are ready to use social media. Once they were ready to really engage in conversations with their constituents, the schools found their alumni, in particular, were hungry for an organized connection. Several schools used a fun method for engaging alumni by posting old class pictures and asking them to tag their classmates. It was easy, communal and a different engagement than a request for \$25 to the endowment fund. One participant found that his students were having fun using Twitter,

and by joining in with them he was reminded what it felt like to be playful. When the participants could let their guards down a bit, worry less about staying on message and more about being real people, they found using social media no longer felt like a task on their to-do list but rather reinforced human connections and reminded them of the value of doing their work in a joyful spirit. That's why the tools are so widespread, after all. As he told us, "This program made me see things in a different way. I had 50 followers on Twitter in March, I now have 202." He is also in the process of incorporating the use of social media into his curricula.

Using social media for fundraising to connect or re-connect with alumni was embraced, but challenges remain. Some schools struggled initially with idea of connecting with parents and students using social media. But they also quickly saw that their former students were already quite active online. One participant said doing their experiment and participating in the Causes challenge allowed her school head "to recognize that a large portion of our school community was involved in social media already." However, an ongoing challenge for the schools was trying to undo the long-held assumption that only staff is responsible for weaving conversations with parents and alumni. Even when schools understand (as described below) that they are no longer speaking *at* constituencies but having real conversations with them, the notion that parents could be engaged to help lead conversations was not entirely comfortable or natural for every school.

Orthodox Day Schools and Facebook: It's complicated. There is an opportunity for the Foundation to facilitate a conversation among Orthodox schools about the use of social media by students and how that helps or hinders their primary mission of Torah study. We hadn't anticipated the strong pushback against Facebook, in particular, and need to make sure that in future academies, the curriculum serves those schools who prefer to put their energies into strengthening their own website community, rather than use what to them are quite controversial platforms. That said, given all the anecdotal evidence that both students and alumni of these schools are themselves using Facebook, it would also be wise to invest more time in devising appropriate strategies to help schools manage this dilemma.

Darim and Big Duck were well received. All of the participating schools appreciated the knowledge and skills brought to the Academy by Darim and the Big Duck coaches. The initial concern that there might be a cultural divide between the more orthodox schools and the coaches did not materialize.

Side-to-Side support. The Facebook group page became a place and opportunity for Academy participants to share lessons and ask questions of each other. This was particularly relevant during the Causes campaign. Here is an example of Heidi Greenbaum sharing a lesson of SAR's success reaching out during the school day for the fundraising campaign:



Heidi Luden Greenbaum

What works.... set up computers for parents, grandparents... particularly on busy school days. Today was the 1st grade Math Fair. We signed up an estimated 30 people at the table. Others took a postcard and signed up elsewhere. 50 people this morning total. Teachers also stopped by to get some help and donate.

On a promo level, we wore pins that say 'Are You 1 in 1000?', handed out postcards and now are running a promo "Get a free ice cream cone when you recruit 2 people campaign. " Fliers, emails, etc. Great buzz. Have fun!!



The “Aha!s”

One of our Academy hopes was that participants would have at least one moment during the experience that was eye-opening, when they saw how social media could change their schools and their communities to work in fundamentally new and better ways. And they did have many “Aha!” moments. These moments were just as important, perhaps even more so, than learning which button to push.

Some of the “Aha!s” included:

- Using Twitter on a class trip to Washington, DC to find that a large number of parents followed her and participating in the conversation on Twitter about the trip.
- Reporting feeling empowered and knowledgeable enough to talk to his peers about the pros and cons of Facebook.
- One participant realizing that using social media did not reduce or replace the need for face-to-face interactions.
- Understanding integrated communications, the idea that your Facebook Page supports all the things you’re doing on your website and in your emails and in your communications generally.
- Re-learning how to speak to individuals and groups in natural ways that follow their interests, and not necessarily the school’s, struck a number of participants as significant. One participant reflected on this, “This process alone made us realize how many different groups of people there are that our school would benefit from engaging through constant communication and how they do not all require nor desire the same information presented in the same way.” Another added, “This idea, that different people need to need conversations was eye-opening for many participants who were embedded in the notion that schools speak and everyone on the outside, parents and alumni, just listen.” Finally, a third recalled, “The conversation has to be meaningful and sticky – to them! No one listens unless we’re sharing and engaging. We have to be real, have to have a personality.”

Looking ahead: Continued support for current Academy participants is desired. In our last round of follow-up conversations, the schools expressed enthusiasm for checking-in with their coaches six months after the formal end of the Academy. They would also like the opportunity to reach out to the coaches with a quick question on an as-needed basis. The Academy Facebook group page is a good asset that should be continued. Building peer-to-peer connections helps the field in general, encourages participants to learn from and with one another, and provides ideas for further experimentation. It is also a great vehicle for sharing school success stories. Whether an incentive for continued participation is necessary should be discussed.

Planning for Academy 2.0

If the Foundation chooses to continue to provide social media capacity building support for schools, we recommend the following changes:

Clearer application process. Some participants expressed confusion about who did what between Personal Democracy Consultants, Darim Online and Big Duck. They were also unclear about exactly what would happen when. This can be clarified by preparing and distributing a more detailed description of the program's purpose and schedule as part of the application and acceptance process, along with a readiness screening call described below.

Clearer academy goals and schedule: Several participants said they would have benefited from a clearer statement of goals at the beginning of the academy, and a full calendar of upcoming work. In particular, the match program—should it be repeated—ought to be introduced from the beginning of the Academy to allow schools to integrate it into their development calendars.

Readiness screening. Readiness to participate in the Academy needs to be screened for during the application process. A short interview with applicants can determine several things: 1) the level of buy-in from the heads of school; 2) the current culture of the school that may or may not make any endeavor into social media worthwhile; and 3) their current technological readiness to participate in an Academy, meaning that they have at least, the most fundamental web and email capacity to enable them to fully participate in an Academy. In addition, the responsibilities of participants to attend all of the in-person sessions, take the lead in scheduling with the coaches, and post on the Facebook page and blogs their experiences needs to be emphasized.

Offer novice and advanced tracks. Two tracks for participation can be established based on the readiness of the applicant. A novice track for a broader swath of schools instituted largely by webinar in advance of the physical Academy is one way to go. (Darim has a track record of implementing efforts like this.) Novices will be encouraged to create social media policies, which will force schools to address their fears and culture issues around social media, and develop adequate email and website capabilities. The

advanced track can then build on these blocks and move directly into social media experimentation and relationship building with their constituencies.

Rearrange the timing of workshops and coaching. Participants suggested keeping both components but re-organizing the Academy to spread the workshops through the Academy calendar instead of bunching them all at the beginning. In addition, if other contests or components are part of the Academy (e.g. a fundraising contest) participants should be encouraged to launch their efforts when it works best for them during the span of the Academy not on a set schedule. The addition of the graduation ceremony was tremendously valuable to share experiences and celebrate the schools' accomplishments. A site-visit by coaches would add to their understanding of the environment and context within which schools are working.

Target heads of schools. There was interest in having some effort aimed directly at heads of schools. They are the ultimate determiners of school culture and they hold the purse strings. Answering their questions and assuaging their fears will help staff become less risk averse when it comes to social media.

Consider a summer start date. The school calendar is generally unfavorable to an effort like the Academy. Several schools did gain more momentum for their social media experiments in the summer. For instance, one school found that summer time allowed them to play and test different tools. Beginning the Academy in the summer would limit participation to the schools where personnel are working in the summer, but would give participating schools an opportunity to start with some breathing room. Or the foundation could support staff time in the summer for schools that do not ordinarily carry that expense.

Conclusion

As a first set of experiments, we believe the Academy, the match program and the data enhancement projects were successful at strengthening the social media capacity of the nine participating schools, as well as also providing Avi Chai with information about the challenges and opportunities in this arena. In addition, there was a ripple effect of learning and participation beyond the immediate Academy participants. For instance, the Facebook group for the Academy has had outside school personnel participating in discussions, and the #jdstech conversation on Twitter, created specifically for Academy participants, has morphed into the broader, ongoing #JEDchat conversation.

The experiments certainly can be fine-tuned further, but the essential outline is clear:

1. Day school staffs want and need help to understand how best to use social media. With some focused training, along with provision of materials and best practices, school staff began to self-organize their efforts. A social media academy, along with a match program and incentives like the data enhancement grants, can be catalytic in this process.

2. While there are cultural and organizational challenges at schools, they are not insurmountable. Schools that demonstrate a basic level of readiness should be offered the opportunity to receive capacity-building support in the social media field. In addition, more can be done to help schools develop and sustain a community of practice around this work.
3. Many schools have a deficit of social media expertise and data maintenance that outside funders can usefully help close. Every school that applied for and received data enhancement support was able to grow their email lists substantially; some closed larger deficits by digitizing old paper records and others discovered that online networking can definitely bring them into renewed contact with treasured alumni. The benefits of these improvements will accrue over time.
4. Finally, the day schools need a push to get over the hump. Left to their own devices, many will lag behind due to other internal priorities. Giving schools an incentive through the match program had the beneficial effect of forcing them to start using social media in new ways, rather than talking about it or finding ways to avoid wrestling with it. Once over that hump, we are seeing schools start to confidently expand this capacity in their own ways.

In sum, we believe this initial set of experiments was well worth Avi Chai's investment and recommend that the foundation continue to support similar programming going forward.