

TRS Today

Interview with Executive Director, Brian Guthrie (BG)

Host, Rhonda Price (RP)

TRS Communications Update

RP: Hello and welcome to TRS Today, a Communications initiative of the Teacher Retirement System of Texas. I'm your host, Rhonda Price. Today, we're going to be talking about what's new with Communications at TRS. Our guest is Executive Director, Brian Guthrie. And Brian, thank you so much for being with us today.

BG: It's my pleasure.

RP: Well as you know, we started the New Year with an exciting initiative – a social media program. We're now on Facebook, YouTube, LinkedIn, and Twitter. Now, I happen to be the manager of the social media program, but there were a whole lot of people who worked very hard to make it happen. Our first step, though, was getting Executive and Board approval. Not many public pension funds in the country are doing this, so why did we decide to?

BG: Well, I think it's very important that we adjust to changing technology and adjust to the changing way in which our society communicates with each other. And as those things change, we have to change and adapt as well. One of the things that I consider very important as Executive Director is being as transparent and as open as possible with our stakeholders, with our members about what we're doing and how we're doing it. And in order to do that effectively, you have to communicate effectively. And the only way to do that in this day and age is to be in the social media world. And so, I think it's fundamentally important that we have a presence on Facebook, and that we have an ability to tweet out updates to members who follow us and that we take advantage of those resources, because it's changing the way that we communicate with each other. And so, we have to adapt.

RP: Let's talk about Facebook for a minute. We have 1500 "likes" so far, and I'm really happy about that, but we do have more than a million members, so you know... we have a ways to go. So what kinds of comments and questions are we getting on Facebook?

BG: Well, we're getting a lot of members asking questions generally about what we're doing at TRS. They may have seen something that happened at a Board meeting, for example, and are posting questions as a result of what they've seen in those meetings. A lot of members are using it a venue to approach us with personal questions about their own benefit. And in those cases, we're really encouraging them to go ahead and take the next step and pointing them to either a counselor or to a website or to some place where they can get information about their specific situation. We really don't want members to use this to post a lot of personal information about themselves, but we also want to use it as another way to reach out to us and then that allows us or you or whomever is monitoring that site to point them in the right direction and get them the help they need.

RP: Well, as you mentioned, we're also tweeting now. And I know that you're a personal fan of tweeting – you do it quite a bit. Why do you like it so much, and on a more serious note, why is TRS doing it?

BG: Well, Twitter to me really is taking this whole communication revolution to a whole new level in terms of the immediacy of getting information. And I think that there's a correct way to use it, and there's probably an incorrect way. What I see TRS doing with Twitter is when we're in a Board meeting, for example, to go ahead and let folks know, "Hey, we're about to discuss this issue. If you're interested in it, why don't you tune in?" Or as an opportunity to say, "We just got three new Board members and so we'd like you to meet them. And if you'd like to learn more about them, go to our website. And here's the information." It's just a way... sort of an immediate way to get the word out and to spread the word about important things that members might be interested in.

RP: Let's talk about YouTube. Right now, there are some videos out there that other people have produced that contain misinformation about pension funds in general and TRS in particular.

BG: We're not in the business of censoring anybody and everyone's entitled to their own opinion. But as you say, there are people out there using YouTube and these other media to present information that is factually incorrect or is, at best, perhaps misleading. And I think it's our job to combat that with the facts and with the correct information and to take advantage of it and to use it as a way to get our message out to folks about what we do and the people that we serve and what our purpose is and answer any questions, so that when people see those other more misleading videos, they have the information to say, "Well, wait a second. That doesn't sound right to me" and to perhaps ask questions about it and to find out more.

RP: And just quickly on LinkedIn, you know, for a long while, people were using it mostly for professional networking and they still are. But LinkedIn has a new feature which allows status updates, as you know, and so we've begun to use it in that way. And you can also follow TRS on LinkedIn, and so we have about 500 people doing that right now. So, just wanted to mention that.

BG: No, I think that's important because I see LinkedIn as a nice complement to Facebook. What we're finding – at least what I'm finding personally as Facebook evolves – is that people make a fundamental choice when they create a Facebook account of whether they're going to use it for just personal friends or if they're going to use it for friendship as well as business related endeavors. And a lot of people are uncomfortable doing the latter, and LinkedIn sort of provides that natural alternative to Facebook for people who want to keep their personal lives separate from their professional lives.

RP: Well, before we leave the topic of social media, we of course want to invite people to join us on these different channels. But before they do, we do need to remind everyone of our social media policy and guidelines that are on the TRS website and also on our Facebook page for example.

BG: Right. Well, as you mentioned, the policy is available online and so I'd encourage everyone to go out and read it. But what I'll say about it is, again, we're not in the business of censoring anybody but we also don't want to provide a medium for our members to opine or discuss

issues that aren't related to TRS. Our Facebook page is designed to talk about TRS issues and to address TRS business. And for that reason, we are not going to allow members to post personal information about something not related to their retirement or to opine about politics or religion or other things that a variety of people have different opinions about. We're not going to engage in those kinds of debates. We're really there to just provide another way to get information out to our members.

RP: And it is great hearing back from them – having that two-way conversation.

BG: Absolutely. It's nice having that conversation, but again, we do want to set some guidelines so that we don't get too far afield when we're having those discussions.

RP: Okay, let's move now to another communication tool that we've been using quite a bit. It's MyTRS. Can you explain to us what that is?

BG: Well, MyTRS is an opportunity for all of our members – both active members and retirees – to log in and register on the TRS website. By registering, they provide us just basic information – an email address, a way to contact them – and that account then becomes linked to their own retirement account. And they have the ability then to go online to request forms, to request publications that perhaps they were receiving in printed form in the past, or in the mail before – they can now get it electronically. It also gives them the opportunity to make changes to their personal information, like if they move or if they purchase a new house or move to a different apartment, they can tell us about that through MyTRS and make the change, rather than having to call us and to go through a long drawn-out process to have that change processed.

RP: And a lot of times, people want to be able to at certain times of the evening when maybe we're not even open.

BG: Exactly. I am one that's notorious, as my staff can attest, for using email for example to communicate things out at odd hours of the evening. And a lot of folks are like that. When they think of something, they want to be able to just take care of it and move on, rather than have to be constrained to routine business hours. And so, MyTRS gives them that option. They can come in 24 hours a day and make changes as they see fit.

RP: And you also mentioned the TRS email subscription service that is part of MyTRS. That is very important, as you know, because we are trying to cut costs in any way we can, and printing and mailing is a big concern.

BG: It really is. And it's becoming a medium that's... I don't want to say it's outdated... but it certainly is becoming increasingly replaceable by electronic formats. For example in the past, we would always update our benefits handbook and every two years, we'd send a copy out to every member, recognizing that many of our active members won't have any reason to necessarily refer to or use that handbook over the next year or year and a half before the next one comes out. Rather than send everything... send all these materials out and in many cases them not being utilized or ignored, let's give our members the option to tell us when they want something, and to request it immediately. And then, they don't have to wait for something to come in the mail, they can get the benefits handbook up on their computer screen or through their portable device, or whatever they happen to be using to access our website. And it's just a

much more efficient way, I believe, of communicating with our members while not having that cost of printing and mailing materials that may not be used.

RP: And it's a plus for us and plus for our members... Because they get the convenience.

BG: I believe so... And certainly, before we leave that, I want to make clear that you can register for MyTRS, you can use the email subscription service, but throughout that process you always have the option of telling us, "You know what? I don't want to get an electronic copy of this. I want you to send me a hard copy." And if you ask for that, we'll do it obviously. But it becomes something that the member asks for, rather than we just provide and hope that someone utilizes.

RP: Thanks for clarifying that. Let's talk about another feature on the TRS website that's relatively new – online surveys. We've done a few now on like, for example, navigating on the website.

BG: We just don't want to take these things for granted. We don't want to assume that our membership wants one thing and really is desiring another. We want to hear from them and having these online surveys is an immediate way for us to find out what's on their mind, and what's working and what's not.

RP: So it sounds like we're really going to stay busy in Communications.

BG: Yeah, you are.

RP: Thanks for being with us, Brian.

BG: It's my pleasure.

RP: And thank you for joining us. We hope you'll join us for the next edition of TRS Today.

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