

# LizGross

## SPEAKERS

Liz Gross, Jenna Spinelle

### **Jenna Spinelle** 00:01

Liz, welcome to higher ed social. Thanks so much for joining us.

### **Liz Gross** 00:04

I'm happy to be here again.

### **Jenna Spinelle** 00:07

All right second time and so we should say that Lougan is not with us while we are recording this but the last time he was on it was just the two of you so we're going to put it together and we'll have have a full episode. So folks and go back and listen to the last one and then hear this one get the get the full picture. Sounds like a plan. Yeah. So Liz for for folks who might not have listened to the the first episode or may have forgotten because you know, pandemic brain? Can you remind us and I think I think maybe the last time you're on was even before you started campus sonar. So catch us up? What have what are what are you doing these days?

### **Liz Gross** 00:50

Yeah, I think the last time I was on higher ed social, I knew campus sonar was going to be a thing, but it was still in the secret phase. So I couldn't talk about it too much. So three plus years later seems like forever. I am the founder and CEO of campus sonar, which is a higher education focused, social listening focused agency that works with campuses and other higher ed partners to better understand audiences provide market intelligence, and essentially help our clients build trust with their target audiences by understanding what's being said, from them and about them online. So I find myself now as like a higher ed entrepreneur, after working on campus, and then in higher ed adjacent land for quite some time, and three, three and a half years seems like a really, really long time. But it also feels like just yesterday, we started campus owner. So time is indeed a weird flat circle.

### **Jenna Spinelle** 01:56

Yeah, so it seems like you guys really took off pretty quickly when you when you started, like I went, you know, I've like I've heard about campus sonar forever. But what, how, how is the the past year have been for you with with all things, all things pandemic? How is social listening changed?

### **Liz Gross** 02:16

Yeah, so social listening itself hasn't changed much at all, we're doing a lot of the same things. We tend to need to do like, pre COVID and post COVID. Now, when we do analyses, so we are doing a lot more historical analysis to help people understand what what is happening now looks like in context with what was happening before even if they weren't listening then so that gives us you know, longer

timeframes, bigger data sets to look at. But I guess the one thing that we are doing differently that we weren't before, is we're also looking industry level for social listening insights, and not just working with campuses. So we're now working on different streams of research within our membership service called stream, where we're actually looking at what are people saying about college admissions on a regular basis? How are alumni talking about their alma mater on a regular basis? How can we benchmark what's happening about campuses to replicate sort of the industry? In in some different reports? What are people saying about online classes? That is new and different for us? The techniques are the same, but the output is different. And that was really inspired by the Coronavirus industry briefings that we did last spring, that was our first chance of listening at scale. So that's how our work is different. But of course, as the company like we're all working from our homes, which was not the norm for all of us. I actually just packed up my belongings from the office yesterday, because we're not going to have an office for the foreseeable future right now. Yeah. Doesn't make sense. So we've been adjusting as we could. And we're getting ready to onboard some brand new team members completely remotely, as I'm sure a lot of folks have had to do on campus, too. So the year was long. I am one of those folks that has not left their home very often in the last 11 months. And I'm not going to be the top of the list to be vaccinated, though just hanging out doing our work online.

**Jenna Spinelle** 04:19

Mm hmm. Big, same, big same. So I know you probably don't want to give away like too much of the the secret sauce, so to speak. But can you talk a little bit about some of those techniques, like how social listening actually happens? Yeah,

**Liz Gross** 04:35

we give away a lot of secrets all the time, actually. And so first things first, when we're doing social listening and campus on our we are making sure that we're using some sort of software that provides both breadth in terms of where it is crawling for mentions. We don't want something that's just Twitter centric, or is just looking at Instagram, for example. And also the app, we want to be able to really control the context of what we're searching for. Worst case scenario, so for us would be like, we're searching for the name of a campus that is also the name of a city and a famous person and maybe two other campuses, all of which could be true. And what we come back with is what you could have found on Twitter, and it's full of garbage, because it has a lot of things that don't mean it. So we've got to use software that has the capabilities to do that. And then we have to write really, really good queries. So if you ever look at the canvas on our blog, sometimes our analysts write for and those are the super nerdy posts, where they really get into, you know, how do we decide what we want to query? How do we determine how to clean the data that comes back or how we're going to segment it. So just all of that structure that goes into the research process is somewhat the secret sauce. We don't we don't keep it secret, because we know not everybody can do it on their own. And that's why we exist. beyond that. It's making sense of the data. Like in any given project, we're working with 1000s to hundreds of 1000s, sometimes over a million individual mentions. And you can't just like throw up a word cloud, and expect that to give you some insights. So we're essentially acting like qualitative researchers and coding and categorizing what comes back and do things that will make sense for our partners. So really basic, high level stuff is athletics, conversation versus non athletics conversation, which always surprises people. I hesitate to use the word always, but I think I can confidently say always surprises people, if they have athletics on campus, how much of the total conversation about

their campus is related to athletics doesn't matter if your team is good or bad, or in Division Three, or even like outside of the NCAA, it is a massive amount of conversation. So using all those so that you can approach social conversation, and social listening as a research method, instead of just like checking your social inbox, is really the totality of the secret sauce behind what we do. We've literally written books to give it away, folks.

**Jenna Spinelle** 07:24

Oh, and this seems like something that like the corporate world has probably been doing for years and years and years now. But higher ed just hadn't. Is that right?

**Liz Gross** 07:33

That is true. I've been exposed to corporate social listening strategies ever since I started going to non higher ed industry conferences. I think my first time at South by Southwest was probably 2010 11. ish. And it was definitely being talked about then. And then I went to a social media strategy summit in 2013. And it was no core part of the conversation. So hospitality big brands, travel industry. They've all been doing this for a decade. Plus now so it's nice for higher ed ketchup.

**Jenna Spinelle** 08:12

Yeah, yeah, I make the joke sometimes that whenever whenever higher ed jumps on board with something you know what's gonna like jump the shark. So now with like, clubhouse, for example, like you know, that like when colleges start getting on there, it's gonna be like, that's the end of it.

**Liz Gross** 08:26

Forget about it. I have this like, deep rooted desire to stay as far away from clubhouse as possible. Like, that's not my professional advice. But my personal opinion is I've heard so much icky stuff about it. I don't want to touch it.

**Jenna Spinelle** 08:47

Yeah, I've done a couple like podcasting rooms on there. And there's like a burgeoning Penn State alumni group on there that I like keep tabs on. But yeah, I'm not like on it every single the kind of the weirdest thing I saw was that somebody was on there. One morning I think she was like in labor like first clubhouse, baby, exclamation point, exclamation point. So yeah, that's that's our life right now people have.

**Liz Gross** 09:20

I'm sure there's lots of good there. But from my perception it was founded from and for a bunch of folks just steeped in privilege. And they have no desire to be accessible for people who can't use an audio only format. And I I am a die hard. Taylor Lorenz groupie, if anyone listening doesn't know who I'm talking about. She currently writes for the New York Times used to work for the Atlantic. She's just an amazing social slash tech slash pop culture journalist. And she's just been vilified on clubhouse for being a journalist for being a woman for a variety of things. And when Taylor Lorenz be something as icky. I tend to believe her.

**Jenna Spinelle** 10:04

Yeah, yeah. So yeah, well, I totally Yeah, take, take all that, it would be great actually I could see campus on are doing like a virtual event with Taylor Lorenz or something like I don't know, she seems like she's very up on social listening also and like might have some things to say for people in, in higher ed about what the kids these days are into.

**Liz Gross 10:29**

I have briefly corresponded with her. And she has some very strict restrictions, because she works for the New York Times. But I do hope that that can happen someday.

**Jenna Spinelle 10:42**

So it's interesting, you talk about like going to non higher ed conferences was that a big, like a big hurdle for you with wherever you were working at the time to kind of get permission to do that, and to break outside of the box, so to speak,

**Liz Gross 10:57**

if I remember correctly, the first. So I know the first time I attended South by Southwest, I was in marketing director role at what any state other than Wisconsin, we call it Community College, but we didn't. And if I remember correctly, I didn't ask for permission. I didn't ask for money. And I took time off to go. Like I, for some reason, I felt like it was for me. And that for them, which is silly. But that was how I approached it. And then the next time that I went, I went the following year. And I co presented with Deb Maui, who's now the VP for comms at Aurora. I had met her at the prior South by Southwest. And we let a conversation about social media and higher ed, this would have been probably 2012. And the room was packed like standing room only. And I know I wasn't funded by my employer to go, I'm fairly certain I didn't take vacation that time though. So it was really something that I pursued on my own. I had mentors who were going, that I really wanted to follow and be there to support them and see how I was doing. And then after that, shortly after that, I moved into higher ed adjacent land where I worked at the student loan servicer. And then it was more like I had to convince them a higher ed conference was worth my time. And all the other ones just made sense. Yeah.

**Jenna Spinelle 12:31**

Yeah. Yeah, I'm so curious to know who was who at South by Southwest was packing the room for a panel on social media. And in higher ed, not to say that wasn't you guys didn't put on a good, a good, you know, session. But just that seems like a very an audience that couldn't care less about what higher ed is doing.

**Liz Gross 12:51**

It was at the time, and I don't know if it's still the case, if and when South by Southwest becomes a an in person event again, at the time, and like the early 2010, there was an interesting somewhat close knit, or became close knit group of higher ed folks that would show up. And Penn State actually did a higher ed meetup at the event for a while. Now packed in that room at South by Southwest was probably like 170 people. So there were 1000s of South by Southwest folks who weren't there. But it was like it was faculty. It was some campus marketers who were there, of course, vendors who want to sell the higher ed. But I've actually gone back, I'm really sad that Storify is no longer a thing because I

had Storify it all the tweets, and I can see who was actually in the session, but I never went and moved that after I archived it. Rip Storify

**Jenna Spinelle** 13:48

Oh, yeah, indeed. Yeah, I used to use it all the time. In my class, I teach journalism. And so that was a great way for them to like, put things together for me to grade and then for them to share too if they were out covering something, but

**Liz Gross** 14:02

so many dead links on my personal blog.

**Jenna Spinelle** 14:08

So you mentioned books before campus. sonars put out books and Lougan said if he was here time he was excited to talk to you about your latest book is I don't know if this is a personal book or campus sonar book, or maybe both.

**Liz Gross** 14:24

It's pretty much both actually started as a personal book and then became a campus on our book. So our latest is called fundamentals of social media strategy, a guide for college campuses. And it is essentially a reboot and massive expansion and short ebook that I published on my own. Six years ago. Now, I think I'd put together like a 20 page guide to higher ed, social media strategy, really high level it was actually meant to be a chapter in a larger book about education and social media. And after I spent all the time writing the chapter, the editor was like, just kidding. You don't want it. And I was really angry, eventually realized, like, you know what, I'm just gonna do it anyway. So I published that on my own back in like 2016, or something like that on my personal website, and then at the end of 2019, like the second half of 2019, I started noticing an uptick of downloads, like I'd made the book free after a couple of years. And people were still downloading it and still using it. And I was like, oh, it could be so much better. Now. What I wrote back in 2016, I, I've learned so much more, I've seen so many more examples. So I asked my marketing manager, like, would we want to put this out if I gave it a quick update? looks like it'll be really fast. And she said, Yes. So I transferred the intellectual property over to campus owner. So it is now a campus owner book, and got started on expanding it. And that 20 page book turned into a 20 chapter, book, that tops 300 pages that we still are giving away for free. But it's really like, what I wish I could give somebody when they asked me, What do I need to know about social media and higher education, I just either wrote it all down or got some guest contributors to fill in where I didn't think I was the best one. And it's jam packed with everything from starting your strategy to talking with executives, staffing your team, to doing content, measuring all the way through to professional development and an ongoing learning. So anyone listening, go grab that book. If you go to my Twitter profile, it's pinned at the top. So go to Liz gross 144 on Twitter, probably the easiest way to find it.

**Jenna Spinelle** 16:58

Okay, well, and we'll put it in the in the show notes too, so folks can can get to it from there. So what I mean it, it seems to me that the biggest hurdle might be for social media managers is to find the time to actually read this thing, right? Especially if you're like, like a team of one who is already doing social

and maybe some other things in addition to that. So if you if anyone listening is already kind of strapped for time and, and attention and, you know, particularly as we still navigate the the pandemic are there, is there a place that you would recommend folks start or if you can only maybe can't devote time to read the whole thing right now, like a couple of chapters to really hit on?

**Liz Gross 17:45**

Yeah, it all depends what, what someone needs, right, then to help them write it. That book is in sections. So the 20 chapters are in have to remember how many sections we wrote three sections, four sections. But the first section is all about overarching strategy. So if you're really stuck with like explaining the purpose of social media, or you are hired to start something where nothing exists, that first section is going to be the most valuable to you. The second section is all about content. So if you're more of like, I know why I'm here, I just don't know what I should do that the second section would be good. The third section is kind of a hodgepodge of answering very specific questions. So it has like, you know, the how tos of engagement strategy, or crisis management or measurement, that's all in there. So you could find the chapter that matches what you need. If what you're looking for is just, you know, help me figure out where I fit in all of this, like, Who are my people? Where should I be learning from all of that? That's chapter 20. If you're trying to make a case for what staff to get that's in section one for staffing, so honestly, just like open up the table of contents and choose your own adventure, but some very, very ambitious readers claimed to have done the whole thing in a day. So if you've got a day budget,

**Jenna Spinelle 19:17**

yeah, yeah, maybe. Maybe you guys can make an audio book form or something like that, or put it out as like as a podcast installments or something.

**Liz Gross 19:26**

Have you been talking to my marketing team?

**Jenna Spinelle 19:31**

Something similar, maybe in the works? Oh, cool. Cool. Cool. Keep us posted. And we'll we'll share it for sure. Absolutely. So thinking about, you know, social listening again, more more broadly. Do does does your approach and your tactic change based on the audience that you're working with, you know, prospective students versus alumni, current students versus parents and whatever those dichotomies might be?

**Liz Gross 19:58**

A little bit yeah. We know that certain audiences, or topics tend to congregate on certain platforms. And it's also around like, do you want to know the thoughts and behaviors and actions of a certain group of people? Or do you want to understand perceptions are brand like both of those take us to different places. If we're looking for insights about a certain group of people, we tend to focus really strongly on social sites and forums. So we will take out everything related to news, we will take out most of what's related to blogs, although depending on the topic, tumblr might stay, because there's still a lot of Tumblr activity out there for certain sub topics. But Reddit and other forums, we love for research, because you tend to get more information or the posts more context, even if they're anonymous, you get a lot more

information. And then Twitter and Twitter and Instagram are going to be huge there. Whereas if we're looking for brand reputation, we want to cast as wide a net as possible so that we can not just understand where everything is being discussed, but also to compare and contrast if certain sources influence the other. Right. So is certain types of news coverage spurred by social media? Or is news coverage influencing how people talk on social media? Like that's really important from a brand perspective, but not helpful if what we want to know is, how do certain students talk about the process. And we found that, depending on what people are talking about, where they're doing, it can be different. So even in the admissions journey, we know that prospective students are more likely to have conversations on forums about the journey, whereas once they're admitted, they're just telling the whole world so that's when everything starts to pop up on Twitter and Instagram. So you as you get to know the industry and the audience's that definitely varies.

**Jenna Spinelle 22:14**

And do do people come to you like they think they they're like, they're looking to validate an assumption that I that may proper, or probably turns out to be wrong thing, you guys in the business of like, helping people, you know, debunk what they think they know about their their audiences, or you know, what people are saying,

**Liz Gross 22:38**

we get a little bit of that, we also get a lot of folks who are very happy to pay for data that proves what they already had a hunch about. Like, there, there is a role for social listening that, you know, I believe most social media managers have a good gut feeling about their community, if they're spending a lot of time with their community. But depending on their resources and their time, they might not have the ability to quantify that in any way. And depending where you're at on the org chart, and what your relationships are like in the organization. That gut feeling might not be trusted. But if it's backed up with data that follows a fairly scientific method, that can be what helps someone explained to like at the cabinet level, you know, these are the concerns of our students, or these are when people this is when people talk about us negatively. And we actually have a bunch of really happy clients who say, you're finding what I expected. But you're equipping me to have this conversation with leadership in a way that I couldn't before. So I love it when we find something that's loose. But we don't always do that.

**Jenna Spinelle 24:02**

Yeah, I mean, it seems like there's also a lot of like power dynamics baked in there, right? So if I'm thinking about like, a Social Media Manager as like, I don't know what 20 something professional, younger professional versus the person that might be on the receiving end of this information is like, you know, 50 something, you know, older white man, for example. And that's, you know, there's lots of different dynamics there. But is that their ideal? I mean, do you guys think about those those types of things to about who's who's asking for this information or who like interacts with these conversations day to day on social versus who's ultimately going to be looking at the data in the end?

**Liz Gross 24:46**

Yeah, I think a lot of what, beyond power dynamics, what feeds into us being able to share that data in a way that could resonate with the cabinet or the board is my team and I have often sat at the levels in the organization that are at or right below the VP. So we know the strategic questions to ask and how to

frame the data in a way that makes sense to them. So we are never going to use, you know, social media lingo to speak to a client at the VP or presidential level. And that is a little bit like nothing against the early career Social Media Manager, I wasn't ready in my 20s to talk at a strategic organizational level. And some folks are just like they have to be in it. Yeah, you've got to be talking to the people and putting out the content. And you're not necessarily given the time or the space to think about how is this impacting our reputation goals or enrollment goals? And when we can step back, and figure out how to answer the question with that frame, that can really help sort of jump a few levels in an organization.

**Jenna Spinelle** 26:05

So I have to ask, what what are people still talking about on Tumblr?

**Liz Gross** 26:12

Though there are certain communities that I see really active on Tumblr, and I haven't been in Tumblr deep in six months or so. So I can't tell you what they're talking about now, but I can tell you who they are. So the art community, really active on Tumblr, so making art sharing art, talking about art, I recently did a project for an art school. And their second most common source of conversation was Tumblr. So that was absolutely happening for them. The LGBTQ plus community, anyone who identifies as queer, is tends to be more active. on Tumblr, we see a lot of just like broad queer community conversation on Tumblr. So if that's a group that you need to understand more about, or understand how they are talking about certain life events, that's a good place to see it. Anyone is in a fandom, like, super nerds that are really excited about whether it be Taylor Swift, or, you know, comic book movies or anything like that fandoms are super popular, all over Tumblr, so may not be relevant to most of higher ed, but if certain degree programs intersect with that sort of fandom, that can be important there as well. And then those folks, you know, talk about other things as well, I really started to realize the impact of Tumblr when we were looking at conversations about COVID-19 and higher ed. And there were people using Tumblr, essentially, like I use would use live journal back when I was a teenager, right? It's, it is still a place where people talk about their day to day. So you can see how people are experiencing things that are important to them. And then how, based on how much that experience has been amplified. We are reblogging. How much that resonates with other people, but there's definitely some some niche communities on Tumblr.

**Jenna Spinelle** 28:23

Yeah, yeah. And I bet if Lougan was here, he would have been able to tell me that you that indeed, you probably have some joke about about how how out of touch I am or you know, I clearly am not into any of these things that you were just talking about. He would have jumped in with some fandoms that I didn't understand it. I'm gonna stick with Taylor Swift. Yeah. So Liz, what's I know, you said you're getting ready to bring on some new team members, what's what's up decks on your on your horizon, as you look out to the rest of this year?

**Liz Gross** 28:58

Yeah, so we are just about to bring on a new person on our marketing team. We circulated that job posting like right around the holidays, that's really going to help us scale, the the feel, and the ethos behind how campus donor wants to communicate with people to what we need to do to grow our business. So for folks listening, I shared a really long thread back in December about what we were

looking for in this person while we were hiring them what it looked like and got a really good feedback, got really good feedback about why we were how we were sharing the job. And I had to chuckle and I think I'm going to say this here publicly for the first time. How many people were, you know, saying really nice things about how we shared the job, what the job was going to be all that sort of thing. When and when you read it correctly. The job means we're going to send more emails to people on campus and if there's anything Anyone on campus likes to complain about, rightfully so it's crappy vendor email. So that role is to help us scale email outreach in a way that feels right to us. So we're going to be playing around with that, mostly to the second half of 2021. And then our other additions, which we are recruiting for right now and might still be recruiting for when this goes live, are folks that do the work for our clients. So we're adding a social media data analyst, we're adding a social media strategist. And that's to join existing teams that have those folks. So we are we are growing a lot. We had an increase in client service of over 200%, from 2020, compared to 2019. We sold over 400%, more in 2020, as we did in 2019. And we're going to keep growing. And since we're not just like a plug and play, repeat with everybody sort of business, we've got to grow our team as we grow. So by the end of 2021, there will be a whopping 15 people. And campus sonar will still be geographically distributed. And at that point, we should, you might be in your 50 concurrent clients at that point, which would terrify some of my team members, if they hear that, but it's in the plans and they've seen the plans. So it should be pretty exciting. And it's it is wild trying to grow a business in a pandemic in an industry that is feeling pressure from all sides, but so far and so good. And I'm looking forward to keeping it going.

**Jenna Spinelle** 31:45

Yeah, well, that's amazing. Congratulations on everything you've you've done so far. We'll link to the book in in the show notes and every all the other good stuff campus on our does, and I really appreciate you taking the time today. Liz.

**Liz Gross** 32:02

Thanks so much. Jenna will tell Lougan What do you miss them?

**Jenna Spinelle** 32:05

We will well we'll put it on Tumblr. He can find it there.

**Liz Gross** 32:08

Yes.