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Friday, May 1, 2009

Colleges Using Technology to Recruit Students Try to Hang On to the Conversation

By SARA LIPKA

Higher education traffics in reputations. To thrive as an institution means keeping up with competitors while setting yourself apart. But as good as colleges have become at building brands, the game is shifting to social media, where there is perpetual motion and little control.

Image gains importance in admissions season, and this one's a doozy. It is defined by high anxiety about yield—the percentage of accepted students who enroll, crucial and unpredictable in a slumping economy—and concerted efforts to woo applicants online. Data from the Center for Marketing Research at the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth show that last fall, 61 percent of admissions offices were using social-networking sites and 41 percent had blogs, up from 29 percent and 33 percent, respectively, in 2007.

As technology evolves, colleges feel pressure to be present in every possible way. A suite of student blogs, now common, probably falls short. So Assumption College's Web site features a stream of students' Twitter-style one-liners, constantly refreshed. To display dynamic images, the University of New Mexico maintains a Flickr pool, fed by photos from users' linked accounts. Dozens of colleges have started dispatching updates on Twitter, and by last month two-thirds of institutions had official Facebook pages, according to Brad J. Ward, co-founder of the Web-based-marketing firm BlueFuego.

Staying current isn't the only challenge. With social media, anyone can chime in. Colleges that were once occupied with staying on message are warily opening up to the e-masses—and trying to get used to that.

"You don't own the conversation anymore," Mr. Ward tells clients. "You have to let go."

'A Learning Curve'

Ohio State University knows that now. Last month the university removed from its Facebook page comments about the president's relationship with an energy company criticized by environmentalists. Citizens of the online democracy protested, and the university relented. "It's a learning curve," an Ohio State spokesman said. The lesson: No censorship. Well, unless something is threatening or obscene. Or if companies are colonizing Facebook "Class of 2013" groups for marketing purposes, as happened in December with the guidebook publisher College Prowler.

In social media, pitfalls may be more apparent than good techniques. Some colleges are treading the new territory with specific strategies—to recruit students or engage alumni—while others are showing up and feeling their way, working with or fending off an increasing number of vendors in the field.

Approaches vary wildly. What, for example, should a college's Facebook page be? At the State University of New York at New Paltz, it's an active forum for prospective students to pose questions. Staff members, in shifts, post answers within two hours. The page for Texas A&M University, with more than 32,000 fans, serves as a message board for comments and school spirit. Lewis & Clark College, like many smaller institutions, posts mini news releases, with few responses.

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Whether on Facebook or other channels, colleges need sticky content to keep users coming back, says Michael Staton, chief executive of Ingral, a company that develops Web applications for higher education. One tool for everyone, like a Facebook page for thousands of fans with different interests, is no good, he says. "It becomes kind of a blunt instrument."

With blogs, Twitter, and Facebook, some colleges are taking aim at specific audiences, under banners like admissions, alumni, and athletics. They can then draw content from each stream for a more-general site or feed. To generate some of that content, colleges are "crowdsourcing," or farming out production to a large group. The McCombs School of Business at the University of Texas at Austin pulled off a particularly successful video contest; now DePaul University is doing the same.

Innovation, or Gimmick?

Experimentation is tempting, if not always prudent. "There's so much that you can do that it gets overwhelming," says Rachel Reuben, director of Web communication and strategic projects at New Paltz. "You should pick one or two tools, tops, and really focus on them." She is at work on two secret projects.

And one of Mr. Ward's college clients is considering "lifecasting": streaming on its Web site video that is recorded by cameras mounted on students' heads.

But will innovation necessarily raise a college's profile? Its enrollment? Bruce J. Poch isn't sure.

"There's some version of this that is going to be crucial," says Mr. Poch, vice president and dean of admissions at Pomona College. The rest he calls faddism. A recent survey by the College Board and the Art & Science Group, a higher-education consulting firm, found that only 24 percent of students became more interested in a college from social-networking sites. Eighty-eight percent said the same about campus visits.

In the fall, Mr. Poch plans to sit down with freshmen to talk about how Facebook groups affected their decision to enroll. Skeptical of the "bleeding edge," he is going to watch social-media pioneers for now and see what patterns emerge. "I don't know whether it's lazy or wise," he says. "Maybe somewhere in between."