



THE FIVE FUNDAMENTAL STEPS FOR DEVELOPING A POWERFUL SOCIAL NETWORKING STRATEGY FOR COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

The purpose of this *White Paper* is to examine the five fundamental steps for developing powerful institutional social networks that make full use of innovative 2.0 tools, coordinate them to achieve maximum effect, and integrate them with traditional or ongoing marketing, recruiting, and fundraising campaigns. The five fundamental steps are:

- I. **Start with Strategy**
- II. **Create a Powerful Network Built on User-Generated Content**
- III. **Give the Network Content a Foundational Identity**
- IV. **Multiply the Network's Power**
- V. **Measure the Network's Power**

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INTRODUCTION

In spite of its status as the new hot thing, social networking offers numerous opportunities for colleges and universities. Although it is only one tool in the social media/web 2.0 toolbox, the term “social networking” defines the basic function of all of them—each is designed to build community. Whether you choose to build your own network, cast your institutional lot on Facebook, or limit your participation to message boards and videos, there’s no doubt that creating web communities can help you build relationships of value with your most important constituents. The question is, how?

Many institutions are getting involved—a 2008 study by the UMass-Dartmouth Center for Marketing Research states that colleges and universities are adopting social media tactics faster than Fortune 500 companies. Additionally, more than 700 institutional Facebook “Pages” launched by December 2007 shortly after the site opened its doors to corporations and non-profit organizations. Still, a review of eduStyle’s Gallery of Social Sites reveals a strong similarity among Facebook school pages. They typically include the kinds of photography and images available from campus marketing sources, don’t necessarily make

the best use of outside applications and other robust Facebook features, and sometimes have startlingly few friends—for example, a mid-sized public institution with a student population of 16,000 and only 1,000 friends.

In order to gain any benefit from the social web, institutional social networks need to build sustainable communities that grow and significantly expand their reach. Simply throwing a page up on Facebook or pulling together your own online network is no guarantee of success—if you build it, they may or may not come. Colleges and universities would be wise to develop networks that have the same kind of power commercial networks like Twitter or MySpace do—the power to attract members who will broadcast network benefits throughout the digital ecosystem, attract other members, and create an ongoing community which feeds marketing and recruiting efforts.

STEP I: START WITH STRATEGY

Social networks can strengthen a marketing campaign even if they play only a secondary role. So far, they seem to work best as campaign feeders (though they are now taking the lead role in many



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corporate efforts). Because of its relationship-building power, social networking could become a brave new tool to help achieve a number of significant institutional goals, in particular:

- Expanding admissions inquiry pools
- Tracking prospective students as they move through the recruiting funnel
- Improving yield and conversion rates
- Bringing alumni back home and integrating them into recruiting and fundraising
- Expanding potential donor pools, particularly for annual funds
- Broadcasting your brand through viral word of mouse
- Expanding the reach and constancy of your institutional identity

A powerful network can have a positive impact on all of these, but it can't and shouldn't replace traditional marketing programs. More importantly, it should never be undertaken without a clear strategy. Too many institutions are jumping into tactics and technology before clarifying their social media objectives. To focus on technology first is to work backwards—successful social networks are built by people, not the latest gadget. Social networks gain power from the interaction among community members. A viable strategy, therefore, starts by defining your key audiences and assessing their social media readiness and levels of participation. Typically, most colleges and universities would consider a similar set of key audiences, including:

- Prospective students and their parents
- Current students and their parents
- Prospective faculty
- Current faculty
- Current undergraduate and graduate students
- Prospective donors
- Donors and alumni
- Friends, business and community leaders

While the generic quality of this list helps limit scope, it also limits network potential. When considering alumni, for example, would you build one network for all alumni knowing that younger alums (22-35) will probably not relate well to older, more well-established alums? Does the category for business leaders include people from granting agencies? You can build a social network for any number of targeted audiences—the more specific you are in defining them, the greater the chance that your network will engage their common interests and needs.

ANALYZING PARTICIPATION

Beyond outlining your audiences, you need to know something about how they participate in social networks. Social networks often have social hierarchies where members play different roles:

- Some seek information
- Some prefer to pass info along
- Some are merely spectators
- Others take the lead role in determining what the group will do

Where do representative members of your key audiences fall in this list? How influential will they become? Obviously, bullets two and four represent members who appear to be the most useful for helping to build your network. But what exactly will they do for you and how will they do it? Charlene Li and Josh Bernoff of Forrester Research have created a Social Technographics Profile that further clarifies potential community members by action:

- **Creators**—members who will create more content than anyone else. They are highly motivated, will produce blogs, upload videos, write online articles, and more on yours and other network sites.
- **Critics**—members who will react to online content, post comments on blogs, ratings and reviews, edit wikis, etc. Typically, there are more critics than creators.
- **Collectors**—members who organize and aggregate content by saving URLs and tags on social bookmarking services, voting for news stories on sites like Digg, or gathering RSS feeds, etc. Collectors play an important role in

organizing and spreading content Creators and Critics develop.

- Joiners—members who build profiles on typical social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace, but limit their activity to networks.
- Spectators—members who passively take in what everyone else puts out in the form of blogs, podcasts, videos, etc. This will always be the largest group. Like Joiners, Spectators are necessary to fill out the ranks but should not be considered prime movers and shakers.
- Inactives—members who don't do much of anything, such as Facebook members who haven't updated their profiles in years.

Insights from this kind of profile can tell you what levels of participation you should build into your network. Older alumni, for example, may not be much help in growing your network as people 50 and older tend to be either Spectators or Inactives. Catering to the larger group of Critics might at first glance seem optimal, but you might end up building a social network for people who would rather write reviews than join your network.

It's not necessary to recruit an army of ambassadors from these social pools. In fact, according to Amy Shuen, an internationally recognized expert on technology-driven business models, only a handful of members on any given site are necessary to drive a site's growth: "Unlike the well-established 80/20 Pareto Principle where 80% of results comes from 20% of people, networks like the Web follow an even more extreme power law where 1 to 3% of users can form a critical mass triggering exponential growth." Your job will be to build the strongest relationships with this small group in the most effective profiles.

DEVELOP A LISTENING STRATEGY

The best way to find Creators, Critics, Joiners, Spectators, and Inactives is to develop a listening strategy. To do so, you need to move out into the social web and actually listen to the conversations you find there. New search tools like Technorati, Brandpulse, and Alexa can widen your prospects and tell you what people are saying about you on blogs, networks, and other social media. More importantly, they can also tell you something about what potential community members care about. Blogs, for instance, are particularly good indicators

of issues people get passionate about. Monitoring prospective students' favored social networking sites can give you insight into the site shapes and features they might respond to and the types of content that matter most to them and help you see in which Social Profile they belong.

Listening to social media conversations is an emerging field, so much so that there are companies that conduct this kind of research. If you're faced with limited resources, but have the budget, you might consider hiring this type of vendor. Still, this is something that—if you have the bandwidth—you can do on your own. Chris Brogan, a social media and blog expert, recommends the following steps:

- Find out how to listen and where people are talking about you
- Develop a weekly listening schedule
- Know at least 100 people in 2.0 outlets

This last one may be difficult to accomplish, but is definitely worth aiming for. When venturing out into the social media world, your badge of acceptance will depend on whether you look like you actually participate. You can also survey visitors to your Web site and ask them what sites, services, and technologies they prefer and how they use them. Forrester Research also offers a free tool you can use to help develop a Social Technographics Profile. Go to: groundswell.forrester.com

ESTABLISH MEASURABLE CRITERIA

Once you've mapped out your audiences, you can establish criteria that will help you benchmark progress by asking:

- What will it cost for the network to reach and impact the market?
- How long will it take community members to increase in significant numbers?
- How long will it take community members to influence others in the social web?

The answer to the first question will make it easy to find the budget for your network: many social media tactics have a low cost of entry and require minimal investment. The software is not all that complicated and you can download some of it for free through open-source outlets, such as

DEFINITION: TWITTER*

A free social networking and micro-blogging service that allows users to send "updates" (or "tweets"; text-based posts, up to 140 characters long) to the twitter website, via short message service (e.g. on a cell phone), instant messaging, or a third-party application such as Twitterrific or Facebook.



www.twitter.com

A 2008 study by the UMass-Dartmouth Center for Marketing Research shows that among college and university admissions offices:

- 26% use search engines to research potential students
- 21% are on social networks Facebook and MySpace
- 61% are using minimum of one form of social media
- 55% are very familiar with social networking

DEFINITION: RSS*

Really simple syndication: format that streams from web to RSS reader app so users don't have to check sites to keep up.

DEFINITION: BRANDPULSE*

Innovative text mining application with new blog analytics capability is designed to help marketers and brand managers track, measure and analyze information from nearly two million blogs a day.

DEFINITION: WIDGET*

A small software application you can distribute over the web. In computer programming, a widget (or control) is an element of a Graphical User Interface (GUI) that displays an information arrangement changeable by the user, such as a window or a text box.

well-known blog programs like Wordpress. The exception is video, but that too can be captured in inexpensive ways through your staff and students. Answers to the second and third questions will depend on how much effort you've committed to building a robust network—for most institutions, this is a question of resources.

WHERE TO GO FROM HERE

By creating a strategy based on what you know about your audiences, you've taken a crucial step toward building a network. However, if that's all you do your strategy will be incomplete. To fill it out in a way that answers the above questions, you must:

- Develop opportunities for user-generated content to define and engage the network
- Develop a system for driving traffic to and from the network
- Identify ways to increase the viral elements of the network

The only way to create a powerful network is by building and generating user value, a value that starts with content.

STEP II: CREATE A POWERFUL NETWORK BUILT ON USER-GENERATED CONTENT

No matter what the form, the key to understanding social media is to remember that content is the key to all transactions in this world. Every social networking site's primary function is to display user-generated content. They exist for no other purpose and contrary to popular but mistaken perceptions, are not simply virtual yearbooks. Social networking sites draw users who want to create content. Users create profiles they can individualize through text, photographs, blogs, and other site features and applications.

WHAT THEY WANT

Powerful networks have two big things in common. First, they thrive in today's web environment. Evolutions in software, networking technology, and hardware have transformed the Web into a highly fluid place where individual sites are no longer seen as closed destinations but open platforms that connect users to a wide world of other sites and services. Your network—and all social networks are really just web sites—has to do the same. Second, your network should function in line with user expectations. For today's users—particularly millennials—the web has always been

the center of their lives. Thanks to the explosive growth of social media, they see this as a space that enables what the authors of the Hanover Research Council's 2008 report have dubbed “a participatory culture.” This is a culture defined by highly active—not passive—participants who use it as a way to express themselves and attract others—for many, it's a virtual social club, journal, filing cabinet, photo album, and up-to-the-minute encyclopedia...that is, if we limit our view to well-known networks like Facebook and MySpace. The social web, however, is much more than that. It's also a space where people decide what news matters and what doesn't; where issues can be examined in greater depth than in traditional media; where social and political movements are born, such as Voice of the Faithful (VOTF); and where people have used it in profound ways, such as the Egyptian journalists fighting for free speech who tracked each other's whereabouts on Twitter after they'd been arrested.

Millennials and social media acolytes believe that social web content belongs to everyone. This belief creates movement and drives all social expressions from the superficial to the substantive. It means everyone has the right to read, react, critique, comment on, and even rework nearly all of the content on any social media site. Highly intuitive users—perhaps the most sophisticated ever—millennials are comfortable on nearly any technology and because they live in a culture oversaturated with marketing and information, they are seeking a level of authenticity from those who wish to communicate with them. We can define that authenticity as value. In this environment, a social network engages users on a much deeper level by building a sustained (long-term) relationship with them, one in which they play an important and active role. It is not, thus, the network itself but the level of participation that network affords users that makes it powerful.

CONTENT IS ACTIVE

All social network content is designed to be reacted to—even the videos on YouTube have built-in comment features enabling viewers to praise, critique, dissect, or make fun of them. It is also meant to be shared through tagging or bookmarking or mini applications like widgets that connect users to the Internet and enable them to pull content off one site and put it on another.

It is these actions—reacting to and sharing—that drive traffic to and from social networking sites, blogs, and the full-range of social media implementations. When users share content, they give it what Larry Weber calls “viral word of mouse,” building awareness of the content by spreading it through the digital domain. In fact, the principal of content sharing lies at heart of all Web 2.0 services and technologies from social networks to open-source software development.

Creating content is the chief means of communicating among a generation that seeks to control how they communicate, when they communicate, and with whom they communicate. Its somewhat fragmented nature fits young people for whom multi-tasking is a mode of apprehension, not an attention-deficiency. Still, many institutions are reluctant to employ user-generated content as the basis of their social media strategy. Some set up networks with tight control over content creation to protect integrity and image. But these kinds of controls work counter to the social web and run the risk of alienating potential community members. The first and most important rule of any web social community is that it is defined by member contributions, an organic process that grows according to the character of each individual member in collaboration with the community.

SHARING INSTITUTIONAL CONTENT

Thinking about how your content will be shared is as important as enabling users to generate content. Whether you develop a network of your own or join a network, you’ll have to decide on some key issues:

- a. What percentage of user-generated content will you allow? This is crucial because this content will drive the site’s growth and attract other users.
- b. What percentage of institution-generated content will you share on the site? Keep in mind that this content does not have to reveal anything you wish not to reveal—a social network page does not require this kind of disclosure; instead it needs transparency, which is a different thing altogether.

Many institutions also worry about sharing content they create for fear of it being used against them. Mashups—taking original content and

remixing or mashing it into something of your own creation—abound on the social web and are something to be concerned about, particularly in intellectual property terms. By determining precisely what your institution is willing to share, however, you can be proactive in defending against such violations.

STEP III: GIVE THE NETWORK CONTENT A FOUNDATIONAL IDENTITY

Simply allowing for user-generated content—while a worthy first step—is not enough to turn a network into a source of power. Defining what that content will be and what form it will take is the crucial next step. Your goal is to develop networks people will want to join. Offering users the same kinds of content opportunities they can get elsewhere is counterproductive—why should they join your imitation YouTube site, when they already belong to a superior version? At the same time, offering users the chance to do what they can already do on your institutional Web site—connecting alums to job opportunities, for example—is redundant and not original enough to draw them to your network. Ultimately, throwing up a network in the hopes that members will network on their own without any stimulus or incentive will undoubtedly also fail. Once institutions note how little activity their Facebook pages have generated, they will begin to shut them down.

The key to any successful network lies in the experience it provides members. Highly popular networks like BTMS, Elftown, and Facebook offer different kinds of foundational content as well as different ways to share that content and a distinctive experience. Digg, for example, is a web service that focuses on news and enables users to submit and vote on news stories, videos, images, etc. Its foundational content is journalism. flickr’s foundational content is user photographs. Buzznet is all about music and pop culture while CafeMom provides an online community for the mothers of the world. The mini-blog Twitter allows members to broadcast brief messages limited to 140 characters of text. Each site has a unique identity that caters to a specific audience. The network that develops draws members interested in its foundational content and gives them distinctive ways to view, share, and co-create that content.

TEENS CREATE CONTENT

Current research from the Hanover Council reaffirms that—at least among young people—creating content is a social act and is the reason why teens get involved on social networks:

- Currently, 64% of teens online are content creators compared to 57% in 2004
- Those with a social network profile create content at a higher rate—77%
- Blogs and digital journals have the highest rates of growth
- Rate of involvement is growing at a greater pace than the rate of participation on these sites

THE WAYS PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS ARE INVOLVED IN SOCIAL NETWORKS

- Varies by age, gender, and socioeconomic makeup, but not radically
- Broadband access speed not a barrier
- Older girls and older boys participate at higher rates than younger teens
- Teens from all socioeconomic backgrounds participate at comparable rates
- Younger teens favor MySpace heavily; older females turn to Facebook

The Hanover Research Council, March 2008

FOR A COMPLETE LIST OF CURRENT SOCIAL NETWORKS, VISIT:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_social_networking_websites

VIRTUAL SOCIAL ENVIRONMENTS

When you're building a network, you're really creating an environment. The distinctive shape and nature of that environment will be what ultimately builds community. Think beyond the confines of the Facebook or MySpace model—how will your environment draw on the shared interests of like-minded audiences? What areas, subjects, great ideas, etc. will users be able to focus on and interact with?

How will this content not only draw community members, but keep them engaged over the long-term? Some of the most successful corporate and organizational networks have answered that question by focusing on a service model. Target has developed one of the most successful corporate Facebook pages. Originally called "Dorm Survival Guide," the page is aimed at new college students moving into residence halls for the first time in their lives. Before building the page, Target's agency, AKQA, researched a number of social networks and came up with the goal of easing student anxieties about moving into a new and sometimes foreign environment. Armed with a strategy founded on a specific audience insight, they built a site that inspires interaction and engagement. The site offers a number of 2.0 features, including member posts and discussion groups, and also enables students to upload and exchange photos of their new dorm rooms. The site also advises students on design and furnishings, through such devices as a personality test which reveals furniture preferences. Since its inception, it's also been in a state of continuous improvement based on member feedback.

What can colleges and universities take away from Target's experience?

First and foremost, like Target, higher education institutions are already acceptable brands to millennials due to their category, their substance, and place in society. All are seen as offering life-changing benefits to students, though some do

a better job of getting this message across than others. In many ways, web 2.0 tactics should fit easily into institutions built on give and take, consensus-building, and communication...the free exchange of ideas is not that far off web 2.0's guiding principles. However, the most important lesson here lies in learning to play the 2.0 game the way it's supposed to be played.

Target's site content is focused (some might say theme-based). By offering a specific kind of content, it's been able to draw a good-sized crowd and get them actively involved. This might be worth considering when building your own network—what kind of value can you offer potential community members? In this light, an academic institution is a content gold mine—few organizations or companies can offer the depth of knowledge resources a college or university provides. Instead of simply repurposing content from your Web site, why not build communities around the rich range of your campus academic and community offerings, such as:

- An interdisciplinary community
- A financial aid community
- An arts community
- A biochemistry community
- A great books community
- An recent alumni community

Again, profiling your audiences through an active listening strategy can help you define potential foundational content. And this kind of content can work on either a Facebook page or one of your own design. Instead of building a network, you might even rework your Web site. Some corporations and nonprofits have had success developing sites that combine traditional Web site elements with social media, such as www.stonyfield.com. Whatever you do, remember, by defining foundational content you are not claiming to be the sole author of or provider of that content—it will be created, in large part, by your community. You are simply giving community members a place to start.

Recently, I suggested to a women's college that they build a network or Facebook page around the issues inherent in attending a women's college. The focus should be broad enough to address the



Target: Facebook page

content with a big picture view (and not just their college) with the goal of starting an honest conversation. The site could function somewhat like a blog or a mixture like the Stonyfield site, with the college gathering interesting bits of information in numerous formats. They could invite students, alumnae, and faculty as well as colleagues from other institutions, experts on the subject, well-known authors, etc. To offer genuine value, they would have to avoid traditional marketing pitches and/or using the network to directly recruit students or raise money. Instead, by including dialogue from outsiders, even their competitors, the college can remain transparent and gain a level of authenticity that builds trust—an invaluable component of any social network.

STEP IV. MULTIPLY THE NETWORK'S POWER

The bulk of social media tools and technology—RSS, blogs, podcasts, video—not only facilitate conversation, their predominance has created the expectation—especially among millennials—that you will engage members on a much deeper level. They also work poorly in isolation. Deploying a few videos here, a lone RSS feed there with no connection to one another undermines their effective range—both are essentially broadcast vehicles. The goal is for your network—on Facebook or on your own site—to integrate these tools to expand opportunities for connection and growth. This is the reason why so many are incorporated onto Facebook—they broaden the types of interactions available significantly. Without this kind of action leading to growth, your network will ultimately fail as a marketing tool.

Social media tools are simply much more powerful in combination. Clay Shirky, an internationally known writer and speaker on interactive communication, believes that, “We are living in the middle of the largest increase in expressive capability in the history of the human race. More people can communicate more things to more people than has ever been possible in the past...”

To achieve a viral dimension and to reach as many people as possible, your network has to multiply automatically the sum total of its content interactions out into the digital ecosystem. Individual tools like RSS and podcasts work best when bouncing or ping-pong off each other. Ironically, you can't achieve these effects through technology alone—it's always the users who are

responsible for making things happen. The act of sharing content leads to the creation of groups. The growth of flickr provides a good example. In 2005, attendees of Coney Island's famous Mermaid Parade posted hundreds of photographs of the event on flickr, a then brand new web service. They tagged the photos “memraidparade” which allowed anyone keying in the term to find them. To increase sharing, however, flickr did something unusual—whenever a pair of users used the same tag to label a photo, the tag automatically linked them. The link forms a bond between the users and instantly expands the social dimension. This kind of virtual socialization rarely happens through intentional coordination and forcing a viral interaction rarely works...just ask studio executives who've tried to build word-of-mouth by planting studio employees in test audiences. All flickr did was provide the means to make it happen.

What works—and what you need to create instead—is an environment in which people will naturally spread the word. Some of this can be solved with the right content—genuinely interesting content almost always goes viral. Some of it with the right mix of tools. These tools allow you to create and expand your range of social environments for the simple reason that they, too, are relationship-building tools, not merely supplemental add-ons to your site or network pages. When thinking about using these tools, examine the ways in which they are social. Tags, for example, tell you something about the person who made them and enable you to follow his or her choices. RSS feeds make it easier for people to be efficiently connected to a wide range of social activity...blogs, web pages, updates from baseball games, new photos posted on flickr, stock quotes, tagged items on a social bookmarking site like del.icio.us, etc. Widgets spread social content and can run on desktops, web pages, social sites, and mobile phones. Forums and reviews enable frequent posters to get to know each other. They are also ideal for developing regular critics who will interpret content for others, like Harriett Klausner, the famous Amazon reviewer.

MANY TOOLS WORKING TOGETHER

The Hanover Council Report advises institutions to “use a multipronged approach” when building a network or a Facebook page. Essentially, your network should be able to continuously deliver

DEFINITION: TWEETERBOARD*

Tweeterboard is a way of looking at who is influential on twitter based on their conversations with other twitter users. There are other services, like Twitterposter, that base influence on how many followers you have. Tweeterboard looks at who talks to you. Provides conversation analytics.



www.digg.com

PARTICIPATORY ONLINE CULTURE'S SOCIAL MEDIA FORMS & ENVIRONMENTS

- **Affiliations:** informal & formal memberships on social networking sites, message boards, and gaming communities
- **Expressions:** creative expression and/or reworking of content through mash-ups and fan fiction
- **Collaborative Problem Solving:** contributing to a knowledge base through a wiki or other collaborative environment
- **Circulations:** altering distribution and flow of media through podcasting and blogging

The Hanover Research Council, March 2008

content in a variety of media and ways. For example, videos you post on YouTube or iTunesU should have the capability—through widgets—to be grabbed by users and posted on their own Facebook pages. Video and social network content can often work together to seamlessly increase traffic—the combination might entice prospective students to join your network. Your network should always offer users several ways to post, create, and distribute content through mini-applications, news feeds, alerts and updates and icons members can post on their profiles and share with others. Other combinations include turning your admissions blog into something delivered via a social media site instead of your institutional site—this could work with a number of conventional web features.

Ultimately, however, it's the relationship you build with your community members and the larger community of the social web that will set things in motion.

PEOPLE FIRST

Standard social media practice requires participation at several levels, particularly when you are initially promoting your site and building your community. You get what you give, in other words; becoming active on numerous blogs, social networks, and video sites will get you more friends who will in turn pay back your interest by participating on your sites. There are a number of ways to spark this reaction, most prominently:

- Go to blog connections and participate. Take a close look at the comments posted on most worthwhile blogs and you'll see names with links. Bloggers respect bloggers who are actually in the game and build their audiences by participating on other blogs.
- Chris Brogan, a leading 2.0 expert with an excellent blog recommends that you (or your staff) have at least five active social network accounts, such as LinkedIn, Yahoo!Groups, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube.
- Visit message forums and start multiple threads in multiple accounts. In many ways, message forums were an early evolutionary stage of social media and are still highly used venues.
- Share videos on YouTube, iTunesU, MySpace, Google Videos, Yahoo Videos, Dailymotion, Metacafe, etc. No matter where you embed

your videos, they should always give users the opportunity to comment and respond to them. You can also include a discussion forum for videos posted elsewhere.

- Link your content to content sharing sites through the well-known social sharing bookmarklets that commonly appear at the bottom of numerous sites, connecting content to sites like Mixx, Google Bookmarks, Digg, Reddit, Yahoo Bookmarks, Newsvine, and Del.icio.us, to name just a few.

LISTEN TO THEM

It goes without saying that you should always play by and respect community rules. To do so means that you should treat members like advisors not audience, that in addition to finding content that will draw and bind them to the site, you encourage their candor and act on it and pay attention to what they start on their own within your network. This could be anything from subgroups to new content directions to new venues for communicating your brand.

DOING WELL

Although many colleges are experimenting with social media, there seems to be a more wholesale embrace of it on the curriculum side of the house than on the marketing side. Abilene Christian College, for instance, has begun an iPhone initiative with incoming students and faculty members exploring ways social media can influence the teaching-learning experience. Colgate University, however, has made a robust commitment to integrating social media into college communications through:

- News blogs (comments & RSS)
- Flash videos
- flickr photos
- Podcasts
- Webcams
- iTunes

All of this is linked to the College's home page. The site also offers an excellent model for using social media tools in combination. According to Tim O'Keefe, Colgate's Director of Web Content and chief architect for all things 2.0, this was the plan all along:

“Our social media initiatives are one piece of Colgate’s overall communications effort. We feel the podcasts, videos, and blogs help engage our varied constituencies and build a sense of community. That’s what it is all about for us: creating an engaged online community that is excited about our university and that will spread the word about all we offer. We can’t control that message any more, if we ever really could, but we can absolutely shape that message and web 2.0 tools, if used properly, are an increasingly important part of that effort.”

FOR A CLOSER LOOK, VISIT:
<http://www.colgate.edu/>

STEP V. MEASURE THE NETWORK’S POWER

The rise of social media has brought about a radical shift in marketing. Some would say that web 2.0 has more to do with sociology than it does with marketing. Clearly traditional marketing struggles in a 2.0 world where the audience is in control and the metrics are hard to define. How can you promise a return on investment when social networking appears to have only an indirect connection to recruiting and marketing? How do you commit institutional resources to a not-so-sure-thing?

In order to answer these questions, you have to rethink many of your basic assumptions about marketing. You’ll have to learn to avoid the pitch approach to communicating with community members. Facebook’s new ad format could help schools who want to combine old and new tactics—it certainly paid off for San Diego State’s sports-M.B.A. program. Still, a social profile might reap bigger dividends than banner ads, which in the social web are considered too aggressive—this is the reason ads on networks are not doing well. Remember, this generation does not reject the concept of marketing—they simply want better control over their marketing experience.

The social web favors communication and interaction over traditional messaging. In the old marketing model, institutions were the senders, their audiences the receivers. In the social web, your role will change to a creator of communities—you must learn to empower your users to tell your story through member postings on blogs and message boards and elsewhere. You can’t ask them to tell your story exactly the way you want it told as you would an admissions

ambassador—you have to develop content to build trust. Once you’ve done so, they might become passionate believers in and advocates for your community, and hence your brand. In this model, you’ll work for frequency of contact over frequency of messaging, and your most challenging (and rewarding) task will be managing the conversation. In this way, social media can extend a brand campaign by raising awareness in a nearly unlimited domain. Strong brands will come from strong dialogue.

NEW METRICS

Your number one concern will be to find out how long it will take community members to have a positive impact on your marketing goals. This will require employing a new set of metrics that focus on capturing the levels of user interaction and how they pay off—Web.advantage CEO Hollis Thomases has proposed measuring the following:

- Content Contribution: volume of comments, reviews, posts—this tells you how active your Creators and Critics are and what impact your network is having on other sites.
- Content use/Web mentions elsewhere—set up a Google Alert which can provide email updates of the most current rankings your institution and network have earned.
- Social bookmarking/sharing—this measures how often your content is shared by Collectors on del.icio.us, StumbleUpon, Digg, sites that greatly expand your range in specific areas. Digg, for example, might indicate what kind of attention news stories about your campus are generating.
- Subscriptions such as RSS Feeds—these also tell you what Collectors on your network and other networks have been up to.
- Engagement metrics—basic site analyses applied to your network can indicate unique visitors, number and frequency of page or profile views, amount of time spent on whole site or specific pages, the number of visits, depth, frequency, and more.

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DEFINITION: TAGGING*

Process by which users add metadata in the form of tags and keywords to shared content to categorize it. A tag is simply a word you use to describe a bookmark.

Some of this can be measured with a basic analytics program; some will require venturing back out into the social web. However, establishing the kinds of metrics you'll weigh to judge the value of your network should also figure into your marketing plan. And although these measures do not directly measure return on investment, the sum total may reveal the path community members take as they transition from interested outsiders to prospective students or renewed alumni. Above all, in the search-driven world of the Web, getting into 2.0 Web services and social networks provides a kind of social-media optimization of your site. The more links flowing into and out of your site, the better PageRank algorithm you'll get on Google.

CONCLUSION

Social Media like social networks are here to stay. They represent both a social and cultural phenomenon as well as an evolutionary stage in web development. The web is now a global communication infrastructure in which content is becoming more user-generated and transparent. To succeed within it, you need to commit to the long haul. Someone has to own it—Chris Brogan suggests assigning someone the role of Community Manager. Mix technologies and methodologies and keep experimenting, even after your network starts working. Social sites live in a relatively constant state of change and evolution

and community members not only accept this, but come to expect that your site will too. If nothing else, continuously improving your site will expand your community and enable you to keep on top of a constantly accelerating technology curve. The day the web becomes the dominant college choice and fundraising tool is coming soon.



www.mixx.com

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ABOUT STAMATS, INC.

Stamats, Inc. is the nation's premier provider of integrated marketing solutions for higher education institutions. Our legacy of integrated, collaborative work includes publications, research, brand marketing, direct marketing, interactive media, planning, consulting, and advertising. Every year, more than 100 colleges and universities trust the team of integrated marketing professionals at Stamats to help them identify, communicate, and keep their institution's brand promises.



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Fritz McDonald has more than 20 years experience as a professional writer, editor, and creative director. He earned his bachelor's degree at UCLA, and an M.F.A. from the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop. At Stamats, Fritz has created marketing communications and branding programs for colleges and universities across the U.S. He has written articles on higher education marketing for Admissions Marketing Report, and his creative work has garnished numerous awards, including a CASE Gold Regional, more than 40 ADDYs, and Admissions Marketing Report Gold, Silver, and Bronze awards.

A decorative graphic for the Stamats logo, featuring a central blue square with the word "STAMATS" in white serif font. The square is surrounded by intricate, swirling blue lines and leaf-like motifs that extend to the right.

STAMATS

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