OPTION ANXIETY

A new study offers insight into reaching prospective students

By Lance Merker, OmniUpdate

Web, mobile, text, social — these days there seem to be more options for reaching prospective students than ever. Getting a sneak peek into exactly how high school students are engaging with higher education institutions can provide valuable insight when it comes to allocating precious recruitment dollars. That's why every year OmniUpdate, a web content management system provider focused exclusively on higher education, co-sponsors a survey to find out the communications preferences of about 2,000 high school juniors and seniors.

Here are 10 key takeaways about reaching today's college-bound student from "2013 E-Expectations: The Impact of Mobile Browsing on the College Search Process":

1. **Students are mobile, and your institution needs to be mobile, too.** Desktop? What desktop? Prospective students are doing much of their browsing on mobile devices. Of students polled, 78 percent had regular access to a mobile device. The message is clear: Schools that don't have a mobile strategy should put one in place now. If you are going through a complete website redesign, now is the time to dive into responsive and adaptive design. If a redesign is a year or more off, then consider a mobile site with the top-visited pages by mobile users.

 Your highest priority content should be the type of information and interactions prospective students look for while mobile. For example, this year's study showed that many students are willing to submit forms from their smartphones or tablets. Consider building contact forms and campus visit request forms that function well on mobile screens.

2. **Many students have seen college websites only on mobile devices.** Mobile use is growing, and 43 percent of prospective students report using their mobile devices for all their web browsing. This means schools that don't design web pages or emails with smaller displays in mind are missing an opportunity to make a good impression with four in 10 young people. That's an astonishing proportion of a school's prospective students.

3. **Students' first stop is your website, regardless of how they get there.** College websites are the first place 97 percent of students turn to for reliable information when researching schools, so relevant, up-to-date and well-organized website content should be a central pillar of an e-recruitment strategy. Of course, this is easier for institutions that have a user-friendly content management system that allows web pages to be updated quickly and regularly by experts in the subject matter, even if they have little familiarity with online technology.

4. **Campus-specific web apps are appealing.** In the survey, 73 percent of students expressed interest in downloading campus-specific apps for schools on their target list. There are a lot of reasons for colleges to like apps as well. Apps not only make it easier for mobile users to explore a campus but also allow colleges to collect more information from potential students.

5. **Email is still huge.** We've been hearing the death knell for email for a while now, but the numbers don't support that dire prediction. Nearly all students — a whopping 98 percent — would open an email from a college they were interested in attending. After websites, this makes email one of the most popular and reliable e-communication forms out there. Nearly 50 percent of students check email on their mobile devices daily; 67 percent check at least once per week.

 There are two big takeaways for schools here. The first is that email should be part of any recruitment strategy. Second, designing emails with smaller displays to look appealing on smartphones is more important than ever.

6. **Facebook is still tops in social media, but engagement is down.** Prospective students are not only using Facebook less but also visiting colleges' Facebook pages at a much lower rate (35 percent visited school Facebook pages in 2013 versus 67 percent in 2012). Not only that, but now students are 14 percent less likely to "like" a school's Facebook page. However, most reported some sort of interaction on school Facebook pages, with 72 percent looking at photos and 49 percent clicking on a link to a website or watching a video.

   Nevertheless, schools should keep sharing exciting and relevant interactive content on Facebook, giving students the opportunity and a reason to engage with the page. At the same time, because social media site trends can change rapidly, to stay relevent, it's important to monitor what students are using.
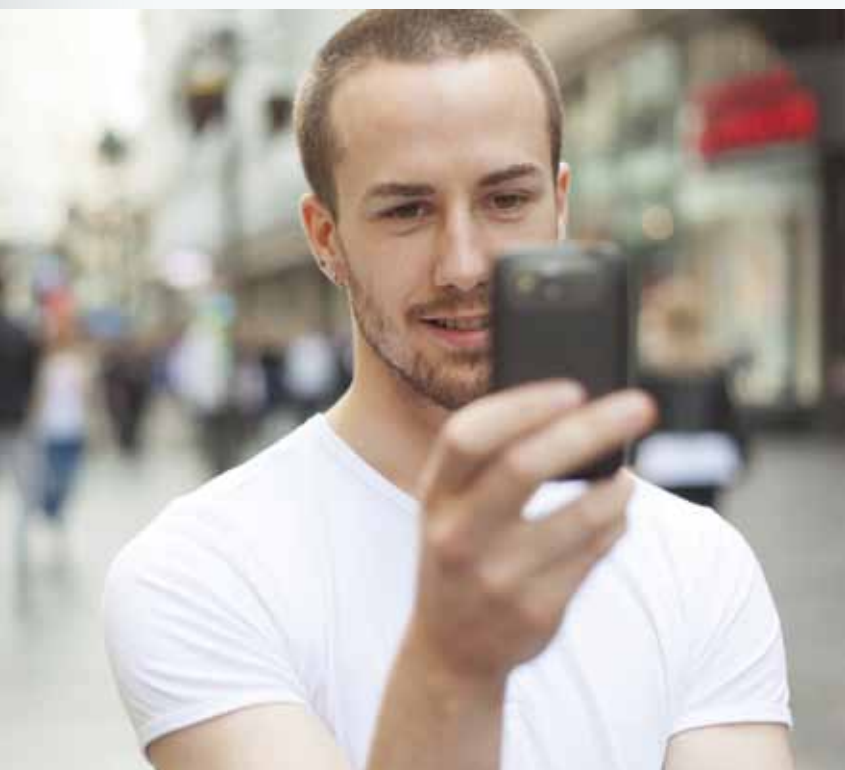
7. **Students are receptive to text messages from colleges.** The fact that texting is popular among students is hardly surprising to anyone who has spent time with a teen lately. However, the fact that nearly two-thirds of students report a willingness to receive text messages from colleges is interesting. Schools can use texts to send prospective students a variety of quick, short messages – from deadline reminders and event notices to quizzes or questions.

   To build their lists, schools can ask students to opt into receiving text messages when asking for cellphone numbers on contact forms. A word of warning: It's important that students opt into receiving text messages because they may react more strongly to an unwanted text than other forms of communication.

8. **Students click on ads.** Nearly one-third of students report clicking on a campus ad during a web search or from a social media site. This could give a competitive advantage to schools placing online ads through social media or search engines.

9. **The more ways to connect, the better, so keep traditional communication in the mix.** Everything from email to texts, social media to apps, and even brochures – today's college-bound students want it all. Schools are responding by allowing students to opt into as many communication streams as they want. Although more students prefer electronic communications, a large number of students are still interested in a variety of print pieces, phone calls and other types of traditional communications. A well-rounded communication mix will help meet the preferences of all students.

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10. **The pace of change is rapid; knowing your analytics is key.** After surveying high school students for several years, it's clear that their preferences can change rapidly, turning conventional wisdom into outdated notions seemingly overnight. For schools, this means never stop researching. Campuses should be continually tracking online visitors. How many are on mobile platforms? Which pages do they visit? Which pages do they bounce away from? Schools can analyze the audience and use that data to guide planning and adapt to visitors.

For more on mobile and web trends, check out the complete "2013 E-Expectations: The Impact of Mobile Browsing on the College Search Process" report, conducted by Noel-Levitz, OmniUpdate, CollegeWeekLive and the National Research Center for College and University Admissions.

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