THREE BIG WEB TRENDS FOR COLLEGES IN 2014

What college leaders must keep in mind when adapting to today's web users

By Lance Merker, OmniUpdate

Colleges, universities and other educational institutions are being buffeted by the rapid changes in technology that are transforming the way we work and communicate. As a content management system (CMS) provider, you can imagine how important it is that we keep schools current with these changes as they serve recruitment goals and support students, faculty, alumni and staff.

Here are three big trends higher education leaders must consider as they adapt to today's web users.

1. The rise of the mobile user

Schools nationwide are seeing an explosion in the number of visits to their websites from smartphones and tablets. Sixty-eight percent of college-bound students report they have viewed college websites on a mobile device, according to the Noel-Levitz "2013 E-Expectations Report." Not only is mobile use growing, but a full 43 percent of students use their mobile devices for all their web browsing.

Staff at Elizabethtown College in Pennsylvania found this mobile trend even stronger among adult learners.

"There's a misconception that it's just young kids accessing websites from mobile phones," said Donna Talarico-Beerman, Director of Integrated Communications at Elizabethtown College. "Our website analytics showed that adult learners are more likely than our traditional students to visit our website from mobile devices."

For this reason, when Elizabethtown College revamped its School of Continuing and Professional Studies website to appeal to adult learners, the school decided to make its site responsive. With responsive design, users can view a site on any device, and the content is automatically formatted to the device's width.

"We wanted to make sure our prospective students had a good experience on the website whether they were viewing it from a tablet, mobile device or desktop computer," said Talarico-Beerman. "It was an extra effort to use responsive design, but we wanted to take care of everything from the get-go. In the long run, it will pay off."

While Elizabethtown went with a responsive site to improve the experience for mobile users, other schools are working on turnkey mobile apps or native apps.

Tarrant County College watched visits to their website from mobile devices shoot up a whopping 16 percent in just eight months. They went from approximately one in 10 visitors accessing their site on a smartphone or tablet to an astonishing one in four.

However, since their CMS could not easily provide a mobile-friendly site, they chose to use OU Campus to implement a mobile site.

"Building a website designed for mobile devices would bring in a lot of responsive design features, in addition to being adaptive and working on any mobile device. It would provide easy access among students and devices," said Robert Heyser, Interim Director of Web Communications at Tarrant County College. "We decided a mobile app was the way to go, and we would implement our main site in OU Campus later – when we were ready and resources were available."

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2. Library services in the digital age

Today's students have high expectations for their libraries. Additionally, as more and more institutions add distance learning as an alternative to classroom-based programs, library websites are becoming even more central to the educational experience.

Noel-Levitz's "National Online Learners Priorities Report" surveyed students at 104 institutions and found that online learners rate adequate online library resources as a top factor in their overall satisfaction with their program.

Libraries are responding to these changing student needs by using technology to improve the experience both online and in person. For example, The University of Utah J. Willard Marriott Library found that when students had questions, they wanted help in different ways.

"Some people just don't want to talk on the phone," said Tracy Medley, Head of Discovery and Web Development at Marriott Library. From that observation, the library built an "Ask the Library" widget through OU Campus.

Found on the library's homepage, the widget directs users to a range of options for getting assistance. The library's phone number is prominently featured, as is a button to start a live online chat with library staff, a form to ask questions via email, a link to a map of service desks in the library and a form to request an in-person library research consultation. Through the widget, the library is able to quickly guide website visitors to assistance in the way that makes the most sense for them.

The library also used its CMS as a portal for users to search multiple databases. Now students can search course reserves, local resources, journals, digital collection items and articles from a single search field.

"More and more users are going to expect this from their online experience," Medley said.

The library also dealt with users' jarring experience of finding pages through search that looked completely different based on the source.

"One of the trends we're seeing is that people want things to be prettier. We're using OU Campus to make their experience seamless using web design templates," Medley said. "We're unifying the look and feel of our services for our patrons."

3. Today's college website: one brand

Western Kentucky University (WKU) was also looking to unify the look and feel of its websites across campus.

"We had 730 different websites that all looked different," said Corie Martin, Creative Web Services Director at Western Kentucky University Public Affairs. "It was impossible for our users. It was important for our brand to have some consistency."

The school's solution was to move to a single CMS for the entire school, with consistent WKU-branded templates.

"The vast majority of departments were supportive of the move because it meant that they would have a better website than they had before, and one that was easier to maintain than what they had before," said Martin. "But it was key to our buy-in process to allow people to manage their own content."

To enable faculty, staff and students to act as site creators and contributors, WKU marketing and IT divisions partnered on a CMS implementation and training program, using a combination of forums, hands-on training workshops, online modules and a self-help website. The team trained 650 CMS users in 18 months with just three employees.

"It was revolutionary for us to move into a CMS because it meant we completely changed how we managed our entire web presence," Martin said. "But that collaboration was really essential to our success."

Lance Merker is President and CEO of OmniUpdate, the leading web content management system (CMS) provider for higher education and a Co-sponsor of the study. Its enterprise web CMS, OU Campus, is used to manage more than 700 college and university websites around the world. OU Campus empowers institutions to effectively manage and enhance their web presence and take advantage of the latest web and mobile technologies. Merker can be reached at LMerker@OmniUpdate.com.