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Blogs: High-Tech Marketing by Accident?

Like it or not, your college is being discussed by bloggers. Students, faculty and others are influencing your brand, image and expensive messaging with a few simple keystrokes – keystrokes that are being read by a rapidly growing population of your prospective students.

So what is a blog and how can you take advantage of this powerful phenomenon? In simplest terms, a blog is a personal, journal-style Web site where the pages consist of “chronological entries.” Most blogging systems provide a way for readers to leave comments about the entries they read or add links and information of their own, turning the blog into a dialoguing tool. Blog entries also can be automatically included in an RSS feed, to which readers of the blog, news engines and other “robots” can subscribe. This means that as new entries are published, readers and other services will automatically receive them.

Bloggers are everywhere these days, and blogging should be considered an opportunity to help further your marketing and PR reach – if managed correctly. Let’s take a deeper look at how you can use blogging to your marketing advantage.

Student Blogs

In higher education, blogging can play an influential role in marketing and PR. Blogs naturally attract search engines due to their optimized site architecture, with clear navigation and page link

structure. Furthermore, blog content, if authentic, creates the “stickiness” that keeps students coming back for more. Why? Because today’s prospective students value peer opinion and are used to trading that opinion online. By sponsoring a student blog on your admissions Web site, you can effectively connect current students and prospective students. Prospective students get to “meet” their peers and hear about their experiences at your institution, directly from them, in their own words. This type of authentic voice is powerful in shaping the perceived image of your college among students and parents.

How do we know that this type of communication is valuable? According to a recent Noel-Levitz study (June 2006) on the e-expectations of students, 64 percent of college-bound and 74 percent of graduate students said they would read a blog. Yet only 18 percent of colleges participating in the study said they provide one. Clearly, an important student need is going unmet.

Faculty Blogs

As popular as student blogs are with prospective students, faculty blogs are just as popular. The

data from the Noel-Levitz study of 1,000 high school juniors revealed that 64 percent would like to read a faculty blog. Interestingly, this rated even higher than reading a student blog.

Giving your faculty access to blogging tools and encouraging them to blog is a great way of directly engaging them in the marketing process while making effective use of their time.

Parent Blogs

Increasingly, colleges and universities have a “for parents” section on their Web sites to provide parents with the information they’ll need during the application process and help them support their child’s college experience. Blogs are an excellent way to accomplish these goals. In particular, having the parents of current students share their experiences with the parents of prospective students has immeasurable value in influencing parental opinion. It is also a great way of keeping parents connected to your institution.

Blogs and the Media

PR professionals know that getting mindshare with the media is increasingly difficult. Today, most media sources are subscribing to RSS feeds as a way of having the latest news quickly delivered to journalists. If you create your press releases as blog entries, they’re automatically syndicated as an RSS feed. While there are other ways of getting your releases into a feed, having them posted as a blog entry allows you to invite the media to post comments and ask questions.

Likewise, it’s rare for journalists not to use the Internet to research a story. Often it’s the first source they’ll turn to. And blogs, including student, faculty or parent blogs, are all good media sources for story ideas.

Blogging Considerations

Before you launch into blogging, here are a few tips to take home with you.

- Take steps to mitigate risk. What is your campus culture going to accept in terms of risk? What steps can you take to mitigate the risk of inappropriate blog entries or reader comments? Tools are available in the marketplace to help colleges and universities maintain “freedom of speech,” while allowing them to monitor, manage and control, if appropriate, the release of offensive or threatening entries by bloggers.
- Communication must be continuous. What can you do to ensure that blogging programs are sustained on your campus? Student bloggers can be paid, granted scholarships or rewarded in other ways. Faculty bloggers can receive recognition from their deans, provosts,

presidents and peers. Perhaps there could be a financial incentive if it can be demonstrated that what the faculty member is doing is directly increasing the number of students enrolling in their courses.

- Someone must be accountable. You might need multiple owners for each blog segment (students, faculty and parents). When people are accountable, it means they have the responsibility for cheering on the bloggers and for taking the heat when problems arise. They also pay attention to blog visitors — where do they come from, how long do they stay, where do they go? Are some bloggers more popular than others? Is it their style or substance that is winning over the audience? The blog cheerleader will then pass on subtle tips for success to other content contributors.

Wherever you start, begin with a small pilot, watch results closely and celebrate like crazy over positive results. Let bloggers use multimedia tools — podcasts, photos, etc. — as these add texture and interest to your site. And gently push people to your blogs through e-communications such as e-mail, IM, newsletters, event mentions, etc. Finally, although blogging is all about allowing free-flowing commentary, a blogging program can, and should, be implemented with intention and forethought so that everyone benefits from the sharing of communication that occurs. Set some basic standards and publish them. Although some bloggers will complain, none of them will truly be surprised. “Bad blogging” is of benefit to no one and will eventually drive desirable bloggers from your site. Let no blog happen by accident.

Lance Merker is the president and CEO of OmniUpdate, a leading provider of Web content management software in the higher education marketplace. The company’s products are used on more than 450 college and university Web sites. Merker has more than 15 years’ experience in the software industry and is a regular guest speaker on the subject of Web content management software at industry conferences nationwide. For more information on Web content management and blogs, you can listen to a variety of free, recorded Webcasts at www.omniupdate.com.