Elizabethtown College Capitalizes on Web Content Reuse for Storytelling

Key Takeaways:

- Capitalize on content by gathering intuitively, sharing extensively, and making sure to engage with campus constituents
- Utilize existing content by repurposing it in multiple formats using a web content management system
- Consider possible uses for new content and the most appropriate channels to distribute it

Elizabethtown College, commonly referred to as E-town, is a private institution located in south central Pennsylvania and founded in 1899 by members of the Church of the Brethren. The college has more than 50 academic programs in the liberal arts, sciences, and professional programs. Elizabethtown is committed to educating its approximately 1,900 undergraduate students for service and leadership, while advancing independent thought, personal integrity, and social responsibility.

A New Kind of Storytelling

Content is king, but when you complement it with a picture, video, or other media element, your story can be enhanced tenfold. With this in mind, Elizabethtown College was in search of ways to augment their campus through multimedia and social storytelling. Donna Talarico, the college's Integrated Marketing Manager, stated that in a fast-paced and technology-driven world, "there's something special about the traditional and tangible" found in compelling stories. So how should institutions go about telling a compelling story nowadays and keep up with the multimedia curve?

A proficient user of OU Campus™, OmniUpdate's enterprise web content management system (CMS), Elizabethtown found several ways to use the CMS to achieve their social storytelling goals. OU Campus helps facilitate storytelling and mitigate potential problems by protecting brand, while allowing for more compelling content use through pictures, videos, and media; improving communication accuracy, timeliness, and sharing capabilities, while expanding audience reach; and avoiding duplication of effort and missed opportunities created by a lack of control.

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Working with What You Have

Elizabethtown strives to be "environmentally friendly" with existing content by repurposing it — a key functionality of the OU Campus CMS. Donna and her team focus on giving unused material a chance to tell a different story and *reduce* the energy needed to gather more material. They also aim to *reuse* what is already present. For example, Elizabethtown's Physics and Engineering web page had a profile piece about a student who also happened to be a transfer student. The profile included direct quotes from the student. One of the student's quotes was used as material on another Physics and Engineering page, while another quote was used in a printed Transfer Student Guide for recruiting other transfer students.

Likewise, the team makes an effort to *recycle* collected content that initially had a different purpose and use it to highlight a new story. For instance, video footage at a campus event can be spun into a story told by the students about service learning and posted to the website via the CMS.
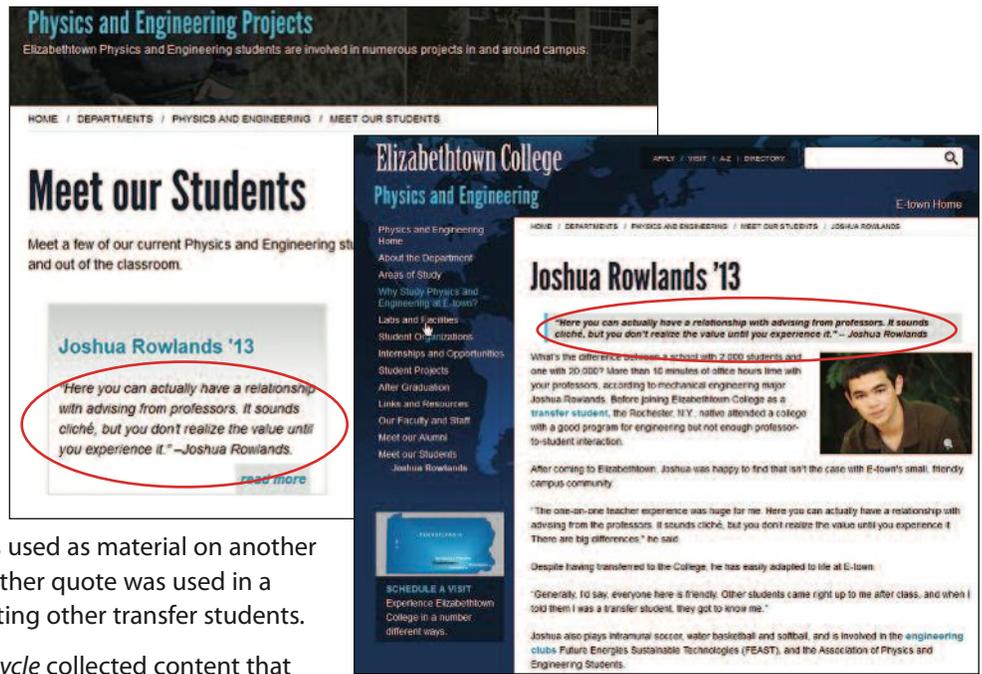
Creating New Content

Elizabethtown found that there are many things to consider when creating new content. First, they realized it's important to keep in mind beforehand the ways content can be repurposed (reduce, reuse, and recycle). Also, it's critical to think about all the different ways to tell a story using point of view, narratives, slideshows, videos, infographics, audio, and the like. When creating new content, Elizabethtown goes through the following thought process:

1. *Can a written piece be further enhanced with multimedia?* For instance, with OU Campus' insert video feature, users only need a URL for easy sharing.
2. *Will a combination of multimedia sources be beneficial?* Elizabethtown often does extensive recaps of events that involve photos, narrative, speeches, and video — all implemented through OU Campus and viewed in one location on the website.
3. *Most important, who is the audience?* This determines where the content should be placed, what length a description needs to be, and how a story will be received. Telling a quick story on Facebook by uploading a photo could have a really positive or negative response. Be mindful and stick with the positive!

Keeping Content Fresh

Integrating multimedia elements to connect people to your website is important, but how can you make sure it's relevant information? One way is to keep good notes. Elizabethtown suggests creating spreadsheets with data about published stories (who, what, where, etc.), good campus sources (e.g, departments that can tell you about the campus' values), or even one with profile templates. And, make sure to share this data.

It's also important to keep content timeless. Elizabethtown suggests using verbiage that won't need to be changed at a later date. For instance, instead of "next semester," use "in the fall of 2012" so that a story can be kept for as long as it is needed. Using OU Campus, Elizabethtown additionally set up a directory for the website with all their stories throughout the site; as a result, the site has gained more traffic. Even though a story can't last forever, it can still be memorable, funny, impactful, and useful. These qualities help maintain readership.

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Another way Elizabethtown keeps content fresh is through OU Campus features like Assets and Snippets, which are part of the reusable content functionality in the CMS. Assets are shared reusable content such as text (e.g., student quotes) and images. Facts and figures about the campus (such as enrollment count or number of courses offered) can be created, stored, and maintained in one location, yet used in multiple places throughout the site or across sites. Content contributors can easily edit an Asset within the CMS, which will then be reflected on all the pages that it is used. Snippets allow for consistent site structuring with pre-formatted HTML content, which is easily placed and then filled in by the contributor (e.g., photo with a caption).

The Secret to Sharing Content

Since the May 2011 launch of their new website with multimedia storytelling, Elizabethtown has seen a positive growth in engagement. The college attributes its success to a great CMS like OU Campus, a solid social media presence, awesome campus users (those creating the great content), and brand ambassadors (outside sharers), including faculty, staff, and students. Elizabethtown believes that with this combination, sharable content will indeed get shared.

The college also found that it's imperative to be sociable. Have brainstorming sessions with content creators about marketing, or relate to students through media like the news. Reflect on your storytelling methods and start by asking the following:

- In what ways is our institution using multimedia storytelling?
- How do we keep ideas fresh?
- What could we be doing better?
- What existing content do we have that we can repurpose?

If You Engage, the Stories Will Come

When marketing, it's good to always be thinking about storytelling. There are stories everywhere, so it's important to be prepared. Always carry a device to capture the stories: a camera, flip cam, notepad, or smartphone. If offices or departments around campus offer handouts, take them. If they offer a newsletter, request to be on their mailing list. Ask for a tour or take someone to lunch. Find out everything you can.

Stories are out there, but they also have the potential of overlapping. To be safe, keep the communication lines open. Create an organized filing system using a CMS like OU Campus to share photos and files across the site. Also, give back to those involved. Share published content with those featured or with those who would find it interesting. Contributing to the sharing culture inspires others to share.