

Case Study

Pepperdine University Engages Students, Faculty, and Staff on Socially Active Community Site

Key Takeaways:

- Community websites aggregate department sites and related content to provide a gateway for internal communications at colleges and universities
- Community websites provide filtering options and other key services, allowing site visitors to independently manage content
- Community websites can be managed using a web content management system, separate from or in conjunction with an institution's public facing site



Pepperdine University is a private Christian college that enrolls approximately 7,700 students annually. The main campus, overlooking the Pacific Ocean in Malibu, is home to Pepperdine's five schools: Seaver College, School of Law, Graduate School of Education and Psychology, Graziadio School of

Business and Management, and School of Public Policy. Courses are also taught at four graduate extension campuses located across Southern California, at a learning center in Silicon Valley, and at six international campuses. Pepperdine has grown to be one of the top-ranking universities in the country, instilling in its students a sense of purpose, service, and leadership.

Scattered Information

In 2002, Pepperdine implemented OmniUpdate's web content management system (CMS), OU Campus™, to manage the university's websites and web unification project with the goal of providing a superb, more consistent website visitor experience. Conversely, Pepperdine's internal community of students, faculty, and staff still had to navigate multiple sites and sort through recurring emails with no one particularly trustworthy source to find university news and other information. Plus, no online interaction was available, which meant no feedback. With competing sets of interests divided among the five schools, it was clear Pepperdine needed a central hub that would build community as well as provide reliable and relevant information to all of its internal constituents.

Project Requirements

Pepperdine's executive team wanted a site that was separate from pepperdine.edu, which serves their marketing and recruitment needs. They wanted a site specifically designed for their internal audiences. After extensive brainstorming and research, Pepperdine's Integrated Marketing Communications team identified three core requisites for the internal community website: compatibility with existing technology like OU Campus, ability to promote two-way communication, and options for personalization.

The project goal was to enable the university community to access information in one place and provide an interactive news, events, and announcements hub.

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From a technical standpoint, the site had to function similarly on both PC and Mac platforms, as well as in all primary browsers, and had to be fully compatible with mobile devices. In addition, it had to be Section 508 compliant and support HTML5 with XHTML standards.

From a user experience standpoint, the team wanted a site that was user-friendly for both visitors and content contributors, as well as socially intuitive. They wanted each item of content to have social media sharing options specific to the item, so a user could share a single news item, event, and so forth. They also wanted to allow users to “like” items and they wanted the likes to be anonymous.

The Integrated Marketing Communications team also wanted site visitors to be able to receive external alerts via RSS feed and email subscriptions. The challenge, however, was that they wanted visitors to be able to filter the alerts by school, audience type, and content type.

Building an Online User Community

Pepperdine underwent a thorough analysis of potential solutions and vendors to help with the project and seriously considered WordPress, but ultimately sought OmniUpdate’s OU Campus CMS and professional services in the development of this overarching Community website. Pepperdine recognized that ease of use was an essential factor for user engagement, and compared to other solutions, the team found that creating content within OU Campus was much easier.

Once development work was underway with OmniUpdate, Pepperdine called on several university teams to gather policies, procedures, and informational materials from the different schools and departments for placement on the site. Working directly with the faculty, staff, and students was imperative, as they were the focus to better communication.

OmniUpdate was able to meet all of the university’s requirements for the project, and in the fall of 2011, Pepperdine launched community.pepperdine.edu. The site provides the university’s internal constituents with access to socially active information that embodies all of Pepperdine in one central location.

Opening the Lines of Communication

The Pepperdine Community home page is a syndication of all site content that builds from RSS items. Within the OU Campus CMS, contributors create a piece of content and RSS item and tag it by content type (News, Notices, or Events), school (e.g., Seaver College), and audience type (Students, Faculty, or Staff). Additional description tags can be added to enhance searching, as well as an image, if desired. Once a contributor publishes the item, the home page is updated automatically with the content.

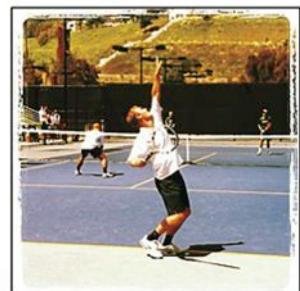
“Pepperdine Today” is a dynamic section of the website that features the News, Notices, and Events items. In this section, site visitors can filter the items by content type, audience type, campus location (e.g., Malibu, International), department (e.g., Finance, Human Resources), and topics (e.g., Arts, Law, Student Life). Visitors can access Pepperdine Today from the site’s home page or within each school’s tab, where items are relevant to the individual schools. Filter preferences can be saved using the “Remember My Settings” feature for fast access, without logging in, when users revisit the site. Site visitors can also find information relevant to their role by looking at Quick Links on the home page. Plus, there are fixed tabs for easy access to departments within each school, an A-Z index that links to other university websites, and a faculty and staff directory.

The Community site also makes efficient use of social media tools, which is fundamental for engagement. Site visitors can “like” and leave comments on any item. Likes are anonymous, though to comment on items, visitors must be authenticated via login. A dynamic list of upcoming events and top-rated posts (based on user likes) are listed on the home page so the community can keep up with what is current. The site can be accessed via mobile devices through a responsive site design, and users can get updates using Twitter, Facebook, email, and RSS. Through tailored backend work by the OmniUpdate professional services team, site visitors are able to customize their RSS and email subscription preferences, per Pepperdine’s requirement. For instance, a visitor can opt to receive information about events only, from the School of Law, and specifically for the student audience.

Top Voted Posts

1. Los Angeles Waves presents a Night at the Viceroy Hotel
2. Did you Know?: Seaver College Model United Nations Team Heads to New York
3. Paws to Relax
4. The Center for Sustainability Celebrates Pepperdine’s Earth Day
5. Ventura County Waves: Burgers & Baseball

Day in Photos



Submit a photo of your own »

Tell Us What You Think »

Results and Lessons Learned

Along with the success of the university's Community website came lessons learned. During the project rollout, Pepperdine recognized the importance of staying active on the website while trying to encourage engagement within the community through the site. The Integrated Marketing Communications team also found it critical to keep the five schools apprised of site development status and changes scheduled to take place, as well as provide post-launch how-to sessions for all constituents.

Since the launch of community.pepperdine.edu, the Pepperdine internal community is actively using the site for its informational needs. Students, faculty, and staff are able to share news and events that are important to them, as well as find important forms, links, and materials all in one place.

With the use of Google Analytics, Pepperdine can see clearly that information is being received and the site is serving its purpose. In the initial months after the website went live, the Community site had approximately 50,000 visitors per month, three page views per visit, and a 60% visitor return rate with mobile traffic comprising 7.5% of visits. The iPhone was markedly the most utilized device, though iPad use was rising. In addition, within months of the Community website's launch, Pepperdine gained 300 new email subscribers—a considerable result from their promotional efforts.

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