



Five Steps to Developing a Powerful Social Networking Strategy

Creating web communities can help you build relationships of value with your most important constituents. Here's how.

BY FRITZ MCDONALD

HIGHER EDUCATION IS JUMPING ON THE social media bandwagon. A 2008 **UMass-Dartmouth** Center for Marketing Research study states that colleges and universities are adopting social media tactics faster than Fortune 500 companies. More than 700 institutional Facebook pages were launched by December 2007 shortly after the site opened its doors to corporations and nonprofits.

But a review of eduStyle's Gallery of Social Sites reveals a strong similarity among Facebook school pages. They typically include the kinds of photography and images available from campus marketing sources, don't necessarily make the best use of outside applications and other robust Facebook features, and

sometimes have startlingly few friends.

To gain any benefit from the social web, institutional social networks need to build sustainable communities that grow and significantly expand their reach. Simply throwing a page up on Facebook or pulling together your own online network is no guarantee of success. If you build it, they may or may not come.

Colleges and universities would be wise to develop networks that have the same kind of power that commercial networks like Twitter or MySpace do—the power to attract members who will broadcast network benefits throughout the digital ecosystem, attract other members, and create an ongoing community that feeds marketing and recruiting efforts. These steps can help you establish a powerful institutional social network. ►

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1 START WITH STRATEGY

Social networks can strengthen a marketing campaign even in a secondary role. So far, they seem to work best as campaign feeders, though they are now taking the lead role in many corporate efforts. Because of its relationship-building power, social networking could become a brave new tool to help achieve a number of significant goals for a higher ed institution, in particular:

- Expanding admissions inquiry pools
- Tracking prospective students as they move through the recruiting funnel
- Improving yield and conversion rates
- Bringing alumni back home and integrating them into recruiting and fundraising
- Expanding potential donor pools, particularly for annual funds
- Broadcasting your brand through “viral word of mouse”
- Expanding the reach and constancy of institutional identity

A powerful network can have a positive impact on all of these, but it can't and shouldn't replace traditional marketing programs. And it should never be undertaken without a clear strategy. Too many IHEs are jumping into tactics and technology before clarifying their objectives. Focusing on technology first is working backward. Successful social networks are built by people, not the latest gadget. They gain power from the interaction among community members.

A viable strategy starts by defining key audiences and assessing their social media readiness and levels of participation. Most IHEs consider a similar set of key audiences, including:

- Prospective students and their parents
- Current students and their parents
- Prospective faculty
- Current faculty
- Current undergraduate and graduate students
- Prospective donors
- Donors and alumni
- Friends, such as business and community leaders

While the generic quality of this list helps limit scope, it also limits network potential. For alumni, would you build one network for all, knowing that younger alums (ages 22-35) will probably not relate well to older, more well established alums? Does the category for business leaders include people from granting agencies? You can build a social network for any number of targeted audiences. The more specific you are in defining them, the greater the chance that your network will engage their common interests and needs.

2 CREATE A POWERFUL NETWORK BUILT ON USER-GENERATED CONTENT

The key to understanding social media is to remember that content matters most with all transactions in this world.

Every social networking site's primary function is to display user-generated content. They exist for no other purpose, and, contrary to popular but mistaken perceptions, are not simply virtual yearbooks. Social networking sites draw users who want to create

content. Users create profiles they can individualize through text, photographs, blogs, and other site features and applications.

What Users Want

Powerful networks have two big things in common. First, they thrive in today's web environment. Evolutions in software, networking technology, and hardware have transformed the web into a highly fluid place where individual sites are no longer seen as closed destinations but as open platforms that connect users to a wide world of other sites and services. Your network—and all social networks are really just websites—has to do the same.

Second, powerful networks function in line with user expectations. For today's users—particularly millennials—the web has always been the center of their lives. Social media enables what the authors of the Hanover Research Council's 2008 report have dubbed “a participatory culture.” This is a culture defined by highly active participants who use it to express themselves and attract others.

For many, it's a virtual social club, journal, filing cabinet, photo album, and up-to-the-minute encyclopedia—that is, if we limit our view to well-known networks like Facebook and MySpace.

The social web, however, is much more. It's a space where people decide what news matters and what doesn't; where issues can be examined in greater depth than in traditional media; where social and political movements are born, such as Voice of the Faithful (VOTF); and where people have communicated in profound ways, such as the Egyptian journalists fighting for free speech who tracked each other's whereabouts on Twitter after they had been arrested.

Content Is Active

All social network content is designed to elicit reaction. Even YouTube has built-in comment features enabling viewers to praise, critique, dissect, or make fun of videos. Content should be shared through tagging or bookmarking or using mini-applications like widgets that connect users to the internet and enable them to pull content off one site and put it on another.

This reacting to and sharing drives traffic to and from social networking sites, blogs, and other social media implementations. When users share content, they give it what Larry Weber calls “viral word of mouse,” building awareness by spreading it through the digital domain. At the heart of Web 2.0 services and technologies, from social networks to open-source software development, is content sharing.

Sharing Institutional Content

Thinking about how content will be shared is as important as enabling users to generate content. How much user-generated content will you allow? This is crucial, because this content will drive the site's growth and attract other users. And how much institution-generated content will you share on the site?

This content does not have to reveal anything you wish not to reveal. A social network page does not require this kind of disclosure; instead, it needs transparency, a different thing altogether. ►

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Many institutions also worry about sharing content they create for fear of it being used against them. Mashups—taking original content and remixing or mashing it into something of your own creation—abound on the social web and are something to be concerned about, particularly in intellectual property terms. By determining precisely what your institution is willing to share, however, you can be proactive in defending against such violations.

3 GIVE THE NETWORK CONTENT A FOUNDATIONAL IDENTITY

Allowing for user-generated content is a worthy first step but is not enough to make a network powerful. Defining what that content will be and what form it will take is the crucial next step.

The goal is to develop networks people want to join. Offering users the same kinds of content opportunities they can get elsewhere is counterproductive. Why should they join your imitation YouTube site when they already belong to a superior version? Offering users the chance to do what they can already do on your institutional website—connecting alums to job opportunities, for example—is redundant and not original enough to draw them to your network.

Throwing up a network in the hopes that members will network on their own without any stimulus or incentive will undoubtedly also fail. Once institutions note how little activity their Facebook pages have generated, they will begin to shut them down.

The key to any successful network lies in the member experience. Popular networks like BTMS, Elftown, and Facebook offer different kinds of foundational content, different ways to share that content, and a distinctive experience. Twitter allows members to broadcast messages limited to 140 characters of text. Each site has a unique identity that caters to a specific audience. The network that develops draws members interested in its foundational content and gives them distinctive ways to view, share, and co-create that content.

Virtual Social Environments

Building a network is really creating an environment. Its distinctive shape and nature will be what ultimately builds community. Think beyond the confines of the Facebook or MySpace model. How will the environment draw on shared interests of like-minded audiences? What areas or great ideas can users focus on and interact with?

4 MULTIPLY THE NETWORK'S POWER

The bulk of social media tools and technology—RSS, blogs, podcasts, video—don't only facilitate conversation. Their predominance has created the expectation—especially among millennials—for member engagement on a much deeper level. They also work poorly in isolation. A few videos here, a lone RSS feed there, with no connection to one another, undermines their effective range. Both are essentially broadcast vehicles. The goal—on Facebook or on your own site—is to integrate these tools to expand opportunities for connection and growth. This is why so many are incorporated onto Facebook; they broaden the types of interactions available significantly. Without this kind of action leading to

growth, your network will ultimately fail as a marketing tool. Social media tools are simply much more powerful in combination.

Many Tools Working Together

The Hanover Council Report advises “a multipronged approach” to building a network or a Facebook page. A network should be able to continuously deliver content in a variety of media and ways. For example, videos posted on YouTube or iTunes U should have the capability—through widgets—to be grabbed by users and posted on their own Facebook pages. Video and social network content can often work together to seamlessly increase traffic, and the combination might entice prospective students to join the network. Users should always have several ways to post, create, and distribute content through mini-applications, news feeds, alerts and updates, and icons that members can post on their profiles and share with others.

One idea: Could your admissions blog be turned into something delivered via a social media site instead of the institutional site? This could work with a number of conventional web features.

Ultimately, however, it's the relationship you build with your community members and the larger community of the social web that will set things in motion.

5 MEASURE THE NETWORK'S POWER

The rise of social media has brought about a radical shift in marketing. Some would say Web 2.0 has more to do with sociology than with marketing. Traditional marketing struggles in a 2.0 world where the audience is in control and the metrics are hard to define. How can you promise ROI when social networking appears to have only an indirect connection to recruiting and marketing? How do you commit institutional resources to a not-so-sure thing?

Rethink your basic assumptions about marketing. For instance, avoid the pitch approach to communicating with community members. Facebook's new ad format could help IHEs combine old and new tactics—it certainly paid off for **San Diego State University's** sports MBA program. Still, a social profile might reap bigger dividends than banner ads (considered too aggressive in the social web). Members of this generation don't reject the concept of marketing. They simply want better control over their marketing experience.

The social web favors communication and interaction over traditional messaging. Institutions used to be the senders, their audiences the receivers. Here IHEs are creators of communities. You must learn to empower your users to tell your story through member postings on blogs and message boards and elsewhere. You can't ask them to tell your story exactly the way you want it told as you would an admissions ambassador; rather, you have to develop content to build trust. Then they might become passionate believers in and advocates for your community and hence your brand. In this way, social media can extend a brand campaign by raising awareness in a nearly unlimited domain. Strong brands will come from strong dialogue. **U**

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