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## **New Technologies in Student Recruitment**

*Blogs, RSS Feeds, Podcasts,  
and Instant Messaging*

*As the information age matures, content still rules. Having a story to tell and a strong message are critical to a successful e-communications plan.*

*But, the tools used to deliver these messages are continually changing. This paper will examine how four emergent technologies—blogs, RSS feeds, podcasts, and instant messaging—can be used to deliver content to prospective students.*



## CHALLENGES & TRENDS

Recruiting students to colleges and universities is about building, strengthening, and maintaining relationships. For today's high school students, these connections are built and maintained using technology. *What are the challenges facing admission and enrollment professionals when deciding what and how to use technology in the recruiting process?*

### 1. Unlike any other generation, millennials use technology to build and maintain relationships.

With an average young person absorbing 8.5 hours of media content each day in only 6.5 hours—giving new meaning to the term “multitasking”—reaching and building relationships with this generation is indeed challenging.<sup>1</sup> Today's teenage students use technology to build and maintain social networks, which are vast and influential and encompass a multitude of communication and technology vehicles. They gravitate toward marketing that is authentic and real—thus the fascination and preference for social networking sites such as MySpace.com and Facebook.com that allow users to control and personalize the content. Though millennials trust very little marketing, they have high expectations of it being personalized, meaningful, and relevant to their unique situation.

### 2. Admission offices face decreasing budgets and increasing enrollment demands.

Today's admission and enrollment offices face the non sequitur of reducing budgets and increasing recruitment expectations. Studies show most admission office budgets and staff continue their downward trajectory even as applications increase.<sup>2</sup> While the increase in applicants may seem positive, it suggests a “shopping” trend—more options, delayed commitment, and a focus on the best price—which leaves little time for admission offices to adapt their recruiting process and take on new technology initiatives.

### *What You Should Know About... The Millennials*

- Were born beginning in 1982 and started going to college in 2000
- Are more numerous, more affluent, and more ethnically diverse
- Are not worried about drugs, sex, and violence
- Follow rules and accept authority
- Trust their parents and take on their values
- Have other nicknames: Generation Y, Echo-Boomers, Net-Generation
- Have been inculcated by older generations that they are vital to the nation
- Equate good news for themselves with good news for the country
- Value honesty, caring, moral courage, patriotism, democracy, and the Golden Rule
- See selfishness as the No. 1 cause for America's problems
- Are pushed to study hard, avoid personal risks, and take advantage of every opportunity
- Believe success in life comes from effort and planning
- Are on track to be the smartest and best-educated generation in history

### 3. Colleges and universities are lagging in the adoption of technology.

While there is evidence to support blogs, RSS feeds, podcasting, and instant messaging as effective communication vehicles for connecting with prospective students, most admission offices have yet to

<sup>1</sup> According to a study conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation

<sup>2</sup> In the State of College Admissions report sponsored by the National Association of College Admissions Counselors (NACAC)



embrace them as part of their e-communication strategy. A national research study found that less than one in three institutions has adopted these recruiting tools.<sup>3</sup> The recently conducted E-Expectations data supports this trend as students say they want to use new technologies to communicate with colleges and universities, but they are not being offered the opportunity.

#### **4. Students have high expectations of communicating via technology.**

When it comes to technology, students move at a different speed than faculty and administrators at most colleges and universities. Many students organize every aspect of their lives with these tools. They get their news from sites like MyYahoo! and Google News that are updated throughout the day. Their favorite blogs have new posts each time they visit, with some even offering photos, videos, and podcasts.<sup>4</sup> Students no longer live in a time where static Web pages offer the experience they desire. And they anxiously await and then quickly adapt to the next new technology. It is extremely difficult for admissions offices to keep pace.

#### **5. Demographic trends indicate a decrease in the number of high school students.**

By 2008, the pool of potential college students will start to decline in most regions of the United States. The Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education predicts that the number of high school graduates will peak in 2008-09 with 3.2 million students.<sup>5</sup> After that, in most parts of the United States, there will be a slow but steady decline in the number of enrollments and graduates. Those declines will be most pronounced in the Midwest and Northeast. This means meeting the enrollment demands at most colleges and universities will be greater than ever.

By understanding the preferred communication methods of the millennials, admission professionals will be in a better position to not only communicate with

### *Technology = Quality*

Research shows a direct correlation exists between the use of technology, the college Web site, and students' perceptions and actions in regards to the school. The Web site effectiveness study conducted in 2001 found that prospective students actively use college Web sites and the sites influence their decisions. Students equate the quality of a college Web site with the quality of the institution itself.

Another study, published in *College & University* in 2001 concurred, as the vast majority of participants in their study felt that an unprofessional Web page indicated a lower quality institution.<sup>6</sup> An article published in the *Journal of College Admission* noted that in high-ability students, over 75% responded that the college Web site increased their interest in applying to the institution.<sup>7</sup>

Consultant Michael Stoner in 2001 concluded that people expect excellence in technology. If the college has a bad Web site, it is a hard sell for counselors no matter how good of a "fit" the school is for a particular student.<sup>8</sup>

these students, but also to build the relationships necessary to bring them through the admissions process to enroll and assimilate.

## **STRATEGIES & IMPLEMENTATION**

Each year college-bound students become increasingly comfortable in their use of e-mail, instant messaging, chat, and other new communication technologies. *So how does an admission office use these new tools to enhance their recruitment strategies and provide prospects with resources?*

<sup>3</sup> The research study was conducted by Noel-Levitz

<sup>4</sup> Smith, 2005, p. 60

<sup>5</sup> WICHE

<sup>6</sup> Pooch, 2001, p.p. 15-21

<sup>7</sup> Williams, 2000, pp. 12-21

<sup>8</sup> Stoner, 2001, pp. 32-37



## Blogs

**WHO?** Online teens are not only communicating, they are also creating. The study conducted by the Pew Internet & American Life Project found that 57% of online teens ages 12-17 created content for the Internet. This content includes blogs, personal Web pages, artwork, photos, stories, and videos—the most popular being self-authored content, like blogs (19%) and Web page creation (22%).<sup>9</sup>

### *The President's Blog*

One popular application of blogs by some schools is the president blog. It's a way for presidents to connect with a vast number of people where they can discuss global issues, for example, and how they might impact the college. Presidents can also post questions to their blog and use it to get feedback on important and timely issues. Blogs can become a very detailed and meaningful conversation rather than a one-way communication from the president.<sup>10</sup>

However, reading blogs is twice as popular as creating them. The Pew Internet & American Life Project report cites 38% of online teens read blogs, 19% of online teens are maintaining their own blogs, and over half of all bloggers are teens. The E-Expectations: Class of 2007 report found that 64% of students would like to read a blog written by a faculty member and 63% would like to read a blog written by a current student.

Despite this, only 18% of colleges and universities are blogging. With the “tell it like it is” generation, this is an incredible missed opportunity.

**WHY?** The advantage to using blogs on a college admission Web site is that they are real and authentic. Blogs are honest, unedited, first-hand accounts of actual

students attending classes and living on campus. By using blogs, prospective students can read stories from students who don't have a marketing or promotional agenda. This allows schools to distinguish themselves from the competition because no other school can tell the same story with the same level of detail.

Blogs give colleges and universities a personality that includes a name and face that can build connections and strengthen relationships. Other advantages of blogs include their ability to quickly and easily release information and integrate with RSS. With blogs, the Web site always has new, up-to-date, and “real” information that prospective students are craving—and admission offices don't have to write it themselves.

**HOW?** Like instant messaging, there are many free blogging programs available, such as Blogger, Moveable Type, and LiveJournal. Any of these can be used without assistance from the technology services department, and the blog content will drive interest when used in the admissions process.

Once the goals for the blog have been determined and agreed to, the best way to get started is to identify students who are already bloggers and ask them to

### *Controlling Blog Content*

Administrators are anxious about blogs used to recruit students—and rightfully so. But blogs don't have to be unwieldy. Additionally, it's the idea of blogging and the authenticity of the stories that are sought after, not the blog technology itself. The virtues of blogging can be accomplished in a number of ways; blogging technologies just make it an easy, convenient, and popular method to deliver content. It's also important to remember that technology has matured to allow for numerous options when it comes to editing, posting, and commenting on blogs.

<sup>9</sup> Lenhardt & Madden, 2005

<sup>10</sup> Goral, 2006



blog for the school's Web site. Another option is to use student ambassadors as online ambassadors or find other students who are keeping a blog or journal for academic purposes—such as a study abroad experience or an internship opportunity.

Colleges and universities should choose their bloggers as carefully as they would a tour guide or ambassador. Have bloggers sign an informal contract. In the contract, the students should be reminded of the reasons for their blogging and who could potentially read their blogs—grandparents, prospective employers, and parents.

Schools should clearly lay out the expectations for the blog. Tell the bloggers how often the blog needs to be updated, what makes a good entry, and what makes a popular entry. Schools might also consider asking bloggers to include pictures, adding credibility and interest to the blog. Schools should also work with their bloggers and teach them how to steer conversation and establish an atmosphere of respect in the community.

### *RSS Feeds*

**WHO?** RSS (“really simple syndication”) is starting to see use in the teen market. Only around 5% of all teens knowingly use RSS, though many use it and don't know it. Portals like MyYahoo!, for example, have RSS built in. Teens use RSS to receive feeds regarding news, sports, shopping, and blog updates.<sup>11</sup>

Currently only 4% of colleges and universities are offering content via RSS. Yet many people are approaching information overload as spam infiltrates their inboxes—thus the growing demand for alternative ways to receive news and information. In the E-Expectations: Class of 2007 research study, 45% of students would like to subscribe to a college's or university's RSS feed.

**WHY?** RSS allows content to be delivered right when it becomes available. It has a 100% delivery rate (meaning

it's not caught by spam filters) and it's 100% spam free. People subscribe or unsubscribe to the feeds whenever they want, with no e-mail address required. RSS delivers news and information right to the desktop, portal, or even cell phone and the information is self-organized into folders, allowing the consumer to be in control. It's synchronous (occurs in real time), easy to use, convenient, and drives people back to the Web site. Its future is promising as it will be included in the new Microsoft Windows operating system “Vista” and Internet Explorer 7.

**HOW?** For RSS feeds to be successful on college and university campuses, content must be written and published frequently and consistently. Like blogs and podcasts, RSS is just the tool used to deliver the news and information.

Admission offices might consider using RSS feeds to remind prospective students of deadlines for admission related materials, financial aid and scholarship deadlines, or housing deadlines—depending on where the students are in the admissions process. Event information, special announcements, calendar items, and campus news are perfect for RSS feeds. For many campuses, this information is already written and used on the campus Web site. It may be possible to reuse and “push” this content out via RSS. Setting up RSS feeds will require assistance from the campus technology services department.

### *Podcasting*

**WHO?** Podcasts—audio and video files distributed online—are the buzz around the teenage world and in admission offices today. Since 2001, more than 30 million iPods have been sold. As podcasting gets easier and the content gets better, Forrester Research projects that by 2010, 12.3 million households will use podcasting, up from 700,000 households in 2006.<sup>12</sup>

Though most of the hype in education has been around

<sup>11</sup> Kerner, 2005

<sup>12</sup> Schadler, 2005



using iPods in the classroom, admission offices have seen success. For example, the admission office of Allegheny College in Pennsylvania has had more than 30,000 podcast downloads in the last 10 months.<sup>13</sup>

**WHY?** When it comes to admission marketing, podcasts, like blogs, can show the real campus. Podcasts are very inexpensive and the material is timely. According to research by Joly (2006), for colleges recruiting students over a three-year period, podcasts provide a different communication vehicle with new and fresh content that continues to strengthen the relationship long-term.

One of the most popular podcast features is the ability to download the content and then listen to it later—when it's convenient for the listener—on an mp3 player, such as an iPod, or a personal computer. Another feature is that updates are automatically sent out via RSS, so subscribers know when new content is available. In addition, podcasts are easy for individuals to create and circulate, especially using Apple's iTunes distribution.

**HOW?** For podcasts to be successful, admission professionals will need to create compelling, relevant content that is useful to prospective students and their parents. Applications for podcasts include campus lectures, special events, alumni stories, student profiles, faculty profiles, athletic events, and music performances.

One of the drawbacks to podcasting in the admissions area is that it requires assistance from technology services or an outside vendor in recording, editing, creating, and posting podcasts.

### *Podstories*

At Mansfield University, podcasts are posted on the college's Web site each week. The podcasts are interviews of four different students during their first year of college. The public relations director conducts the weekly interviews asking the students questions about their transition to college—the stuff college-bound students really want to know, like what dorm life is like and where to find a date. The public relations director also interviews the admissions director on topics like how to find the right college. The PR director then publishes the interviews as podcasts.<sup>14</sup>

Depending on the content, podcasts can fit into any part of the admissions process. At Fitchburg State University in Massachusetts, podcasts are being used to send acceptance letters. Students who were offered admission to the college first received a formal letter, followed by an e-mail with a link to a podcast. The podcast featured congratulatory remarks from the president along with original music and video clips.<sup>15</sup>

Allegheny College in Pennsylvania has weekly 15-minute interviews with campus guests. The podcasts are a component of more traditional marketing and communications, but with the advantages of having more details and being produced in a conversation manner that reaches and connects with people.<sup>16</sup>

*Podstat: By 2010, it is predicated that the podcast audience will be 45-75 million users.*<sup>17</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Joly, 2006

<sup>14</sup> Admission podcasts tackle what students really want to know.

<sup>15</sup> University sends podcasts to applicants.

<sup>16</sup> Joly, 2006

<sup>17</sup> The Podcasting Outlook, 2005



## Instant Messaging

**WHO?** For many years, e-mail was the preferred communication method for teens, yet it may be beginning a slow decline. Even as the presence of e-mail in teens' lives has persisted, their preference has changed. When asked about which modes of communication they use most often when connecting with friends, online teens consistently choose IM over e-mail in a wide array of contexts.<sup>18</sup>

### *Schools Using Instant Messaging*

Villa Julie College

<http://www.vjc.edu/admissions.index.aspx?id=9258>

Augustana College

<http://www.augustana.edu/admissions/im/>

Concordia College

<http://www.cord.edu/dept/admissions/im.php>

University of South Carolina

<http://www.sc.edu/admissions/imchat.htm>

West Virginia University

[http://admissions.wvu.edu/undergraduate/im\\_askwvu.asp](http://admissions.wvu.edu/undergraduate/im_askwvu.asp)

Marywood University

[http://mymarywood.com/home\\_gen\\_v2.asp](http://mymarywood.com/home_gen_v2.asp)

Mount Mercy College

<http://www2.mtmercy.edu/admission/meetrep.html>

Loyola Marymount University

<http://www.lmu.edu/Page9841.aspx>

Gustavus Adolphus College

<http://admission.gustavus.edu/admissions/connect/im.asp>

Lenhardt, Madden, and Hitlin also found in 2005 that 75% of online teens, or about two-thirds of all teenagers, use instant messaging. Of those, 48% say they exchange

instant messages at least once every day. In addition to sending text communication through their instant messaging application, teens share links, photos, music, and videos, and communicate with their parents.

The E-Expectations: Class of 2006 study found that 26% of participants use chat while 81% use instant messaging. As it relates to the college search process, the study found that 77% would like to use instant messaging to ask a college a question and 73% would be willing to receive an instant message from a college.<sup>19</sup>

Yet, only 6% of students had actually instant messaged with someone from the college or university. The E-Recruiting Practices Report from early 2006 reported that 22% of colleges and universities used instant messaging as an e-recruiting tool.<sup>20</sup>

**WHY?** It could be argued that this generation's infatuation with instant messaging can be tied to their "24x7 customer service culture." According to Oblinger, for this generation, e-mail is not fast enough and any delay is cause for dissatisfaction and disengagement.

Instant messaging has several advantages. First, it's immediate and synchronous, which means the communication is occurring in real time. For many teens, e-mail isn't fast enough. Another advantage is that instant messaging has what is known as "system-based" presence, meaning users know if other users are online and available to instant message. This advantage is unique to instant messaging and a major factor in its popularity. In many respects, instant messaging has replaced chat because it, like chat, allows for two or more people to converse while offering many more additional features.

Instant messaging, unlike the other technologies discussed in this paper, is not about content. It is about service—a service that can be provided throughout the admission process. However, as more students are remaining anonymous for a longer period of time, instant

<sup>18</sup> Lenhardt, Madden, & Hitlin, 2005

<sup>19</sup> Geyer, 2005

<sup>20</sup> Mager, 2006



messaging might be more pertinent at later phases in the process when students are applying, deciding whether to enroll, and have questions about the transition to college. As they have questions and concerns throughout the process, a prompt response makes a difference when millennials are making decisions.<sup>21</sup>

**HOW?** Instant messaging is free and doesn't require assistance from a technology services department. The three most popular instant messaging clients are AOL Instant Messenger (AIM), Yahoo!, and MSN. For those who would like to subscribe to all three services, there are free applications, such as Trillian, that will monitor all three types of instant messenger programs.

Admission offices need to set realistic expectations for their instant messaging availability and then promote it. Prospective students don't expect representatives to be online 24 hours per day, seven days per week. The key to success is being available for a predetermined amount of time. Once the office comes up with a realistic instant messaging schedule, be sure to promote it. Schools should publish the schedule and screen names on the Web site. Schools should also include this information in letters and e-mails to prospective students.

## WHAT TO DO

With the decrease in the number of traditional high school graduates and sources for higher education funding, the more than 3,000 colleges and universities in the United States need to find a way to differentiate themselves in the minds of the same students. Research supports the role of the Web site in the recruitment process as the millennials are a tech-savvy generation.

There is no perfect mix of communications or e-communication strategies when it comes to recruiting today's prospective students. Finding the right mix is up to each school, as each has its own distinctions and each student it interacts with has his or her own distinctive personality.

Traditional recruiting methods, such as telecounseling, view books, and campus visits, will continue to be part of the mix, but as technology becomes more prevalent, the mix will need to be adjusted accordingly. While the available research indicates increased usage of new technologies such as blogs, podcasting, RSS feeds, and instant messaging, it's not the new technology tools that will determine success. Rather, colleges will be judged by the content that the tools are delivering. The content must be timely, relevant, and engaging. It must also be intimate and create an emotional attachment, crafting a meaningful experience for prospective students.

### *Maintaining Your Site*

The Web site is the hub for all other electronic marketing. If the Web site is out-of-date, difficult to navigate, and not representative of the brand, colleges shouldn't consider implementing additional technologies until the site meets the expectations of a highly critical audience—prospective students and their parents.

If fixing the entire site is too big of a challenge, start with just the admission section. The e-communication needs to be assigned to someone who sees it as a priority and is held accountable for its maintenance.

<sup>21</sup> Oblinger, 2003





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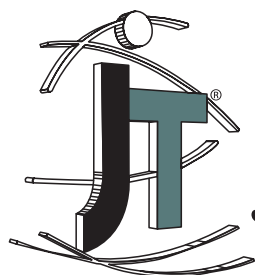


## About James Tower

James Tower provides an unparalleled range of recruiting communications services, helping colleges to create custom-built, highly interactive Web sites; targeted e-mail campaigns; virtual tours; videos, DVDs, and CD-ROMs; and various print publications. In addition, we can combine virtually any of those offerings via our comprehensive AdmissionsGenie service to help colleges reach out with a carefully coordinated program that personalizes the recruiting process and builds a stronger “human connection” with prospective students. James Tower is located in North Mankato, Minnesota, with offices in Omaha, Nebraska, and Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

### Questions about this paper?

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