

How College Access Marketing Campaigns Can Utilize Social Networking Web Sites

What is “User-Generated Content” — and how is it changing the Web?

As the World Wide Web has grown, it has shifted from traditional content developed by dedicated content producers (such as professional writers, publishing companies, journalists, licensed broadcasters, Web site administrators, and production companies) toward more content that is generated by users themselves (amateur content creators). This type of content, which is called “User-Generated Content” (UGC), includes digital video, blogging, podcasting, and wikis (collaborative websites which can be directly edited by anyone with access to them), as well as portions of sites such as amazon.com, where consumers can post their own reviews of products.

UGC is a powerful new way to reach consumers in a format that is highly attractive to them. Many consumers who are inundated with traditional commercial marketing—especially in the 17–35 year old demographic—prefer and actively seek out UGC methods because they are both empowering and consumer-driven. Consumers select which products and services they want to learn more about based on their interests and lifestyle. In addition, new technology such as TiVo and satellite radio provide consumers with the option to skip commercials in traditional TV and radio broadcasts. Utilizing UGC in peer-to-peer testimonials and “viral marketing” (where users are engaged in recommending products to their friends based on their own positive experience) is one way businesses are actively engaging consumers in the marketing process.

YouTube.com is perhaps the most famous example of user-generated content and one that has become extremely popular. Users view and search through thousands of videos posted by others, create lists of their favorites, and e-mail them to friends. This ability to e-mail videos creates “buzz” (viral marketing through word of mouth) among consumers rather than from marketers and is a very powerful tool in building visibility.

What is a “social networking” Web site?

Social networking Web sites are a form of user-generated content where users create a dynamic community through personal profiles/pages that are linked to one another. Profiles can be highly individualized and contain the user’s demographic information, school affiliations, interests, pictures, and other personal information. Most of these sites are free to the user, such as MySpace and Facebook.

Each user’s profile connects to other users’ profiles (their “friends”), creating networks of users with similar interests or backgrounds. For example, a network can be created of all the users who specify in their profile that they attend a certain high school, live in the same town, or like similar music. Once you become someone’s “friend,” you have access to their entire friend

network as well. In this way, every social networking site is actually a conglomeration of many overlapping social networks.

Users can also upload blogs, videos, songs, games, voice content, and links to their profiles, which then become visible to their network. Because this content is being shared among “friends,” it is often valued much more highly than traditional forms of advertising.

Who uses social networking Web sites?

Facebook has 31 million users, and MySpace claims between 34 and 94 million users. According to Nielsen//NetRatings, social networking sites increased their users by 47 percent in 2006. Businesses like Vonage, Netflix and Verizon spent \$12 million to \$37 million in advertising on social networking sites in the same time period.

These sites are also extremely competent in their ability to retain users. MySpace had the highest retention rate, with 67 percent of all March 2006 at-home users using the service again in April.

Of special interest to college access marketing (CAM) campaigns is the popularity these sites have among young people. Alloy Media & Marketing, a youth-oriented marketing firm, released a study stating that 96 percent of 9- to 17-year-olds have used social networking technologies, and 71 percent do so at least once a week. Clearly, finding ways to use these technologies to deliver stay-in-school or go-to-college messages holds great promise for educators.

How can I use social networking sites as part of my CAM plan?

As part of an overall marketing strategy, social networking sites can be a powerful channel for reaching your target audience with your messages. Since marketers in the for-profit world are just beginning to scratch the surface of this medium, the opportunities and the unknowns are many. But the potential is vast. Below are just a few ideas about how these sites could be integrated into a college access marketing campaign:

- Set up a profile for your campaign on a social networking site and use it to interact with your audience.
- Offer information and advice (such as definitions, timelines or tips) through video or audio files posted on the profile.
- Create a daily or weekly campaign blog. Enlist students or others to write or post about their experiences in a variety of college preparatory activities.
- Create some kind of “viral” game, Web application or video that is fun, so that users share it with one another.

One example is www.myspace.com/masscollegegoalsunday. College Goal Sunday is a national, one-day event that promotes college access by helping students fill out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) with help from experts in the industry. Volunteer Christopher Penn created a profile with basic information about the event taking place locally in Framingham, Ma. Using data-mining software available through MySpace for under \$50, Chris was able to find his target audience by searching for “friends” to add to his profile. He used the data headings of

“age,” “town” and “high school” to find appropriate target audience members. He then invited members of the target audience to join his “friends” list, leading them to view the College Goal Sunday profile and event information.

Chris’s 520 “friends” could contact him through the site to ask questions about when and where the event would be held. He also posted some fun instructions on YouTube.com and linked to that video from his profile, giving it some interactivity. College Goal Sunday event coordinators at the site estimate that nearly one-third of attendees mentioned hearing about the event on MySpace. Future evaluations of the event will try to capture these numbers more clearly.

Unlike traditional forms of advertising, social networking Web sites are a free, two-way form of communication between you and your target audience. As with all techniques, social networking sites are only effective when they are integrated into an overall marketing plan that is based on extensive audience research. Used properly, however, they provide an incredibly cost-effective and powerful way to connect with young consumers.

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CollegeAccessMarketing.org (CAM) was created to provide advice, support, and resources to college access marketing practitioners. The site is continuously updated, and maintained by partner organizations Pathways to College Network and the Southern Regional Education Board’s *Go Alliance*.



Pathways to College Network is an alliance of prominent national organizations committed to advancing college access and success for underserved students, including those who are the first generation in their families to go to college, low-income students, underrepresented minorities, and students with disabilities.

Pathways is directed by TERI and its pathwaystocollege.net web site provides evidence-based resources to support the work of researchers, policymakers, and practitioners. For more information about Pathways, please contact 617-535-6829. Media inquires: 617-556-0565.