

Reaching the Connected Generation

“College Access Marketers” Slow in Adopting New Techniques

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So-called “college access marketing” efforts aimed at increasing college attendance and success have been slow to incorporate new techniques such as *buzz marketing*, *viral marketing*, *product seeding* and *guerilla marketing*. Yet for a “connected generation” of potential college students, these kinds of strategies could be crucial in changing behaviors.

More than 60 percent of last year’s high school seniors said they preferred student and faculty blogs to

other information sources, according to the National Research Center for College and University Admissions. More than 80 percent of high school students indicated they would consider reading or responding to an instant message from a college representative. Meanwhile, 57 percent of online teens have used the Internet to access information about postsecondary education, according to the Pew Internet & American Life Project. Studies show that parents are also using new media to navigate the college-going process.

While individual colleges and universities have discovered that personalized web recruiting, interactive websites and chat sessions can contribute to growth in applications, improved quality of applicants and reduced recruitment-related costs, organizations focused more broadly on increasing college access and success seem to be missing this opportunity. College access marketing campaigns could deliver finely tailored messages to their target audience at low cost by mixing traditional marketing through

media outlets with new viral marketing (in which entertaining or informative messages are passed along, usually by email) and buzz marketing (an intense form of word-of-mouth using high-profile entertainment or news to get people to talk about a brand). The Chicago-based Word of Mouth Marketing Association also identifies several other new techniques, including: *community marketing* in which niche communities are formed among people who share interests in a brand; *grassroots marketing* involving organizing volunteers to engage in local outreach; and *product seeding*, that is placing samples of products in the right hands at the right time.

Ever so slowly, college access marketers have begun to adopt some of these techniques. The national KnowHow2Go initiative launched by the American Council on Education and the Lumina Foundation for Education explicitly urges states to encourage viral marketing by distributing campaign information and announcements via email. KnowHow2Go also has started to advertise on Facebook, the college-oriented social networking site. The “Go Ahead, Get Ahead” effort in New Hampshire, meanwhile, hopes to utilize “street teams” to spread its message. Studies of youth voting behavior suggest that such peer-to-peer contact is a highly effective means of promoting socially beneficial behavior.

The “Kick Start” campaign in Maine has distributed T-shirts featuring the campaign mascot and message and launched a teen-oriented game show with contestants competing for scholarship prizes in an effort to create buzz about college attendance. Additionally, a sophisticated interactive website serves as a functional destination for Maine students.

New forms of person-to-person contact such as text and instant messaging could be even more effective in following up traditional mass communications. But the scope of new marketing efforts remains small. One reason is that groups involved in college access work tend to be strapped for resources, so safer, more traditional approaches may win out over untested

propositions. For some, there is also concern that target groups such as underrepresented minorities and low-income students have more limited access to new media, though studies by the Pew project suggest these populations would also be better served by the new marketing strategies.

What might college access marketing campaigns that incorporate new marketing techniques look like? Here are a few possibilities, drawing on some for-profit campaigns and other “social marketing” ideas outlined by Spitfire Strategies in a research report prepared for College Goal Sunday 2006.

Virtual Environments. Coca-Cola built an interactive community based on love of music, including a virtual recording studio, a music mixer, music sharing, surveys and quizzes and interactive games. Coke linked with AOL Music through an under-the-bottlecap offer for a free song download. Word-of-mouth through chat, email and instant messaging generated unprecedented traffic. Ongoing updates and special promotions have led to sustained interest. A similar campaign for college access might have students design a “Joe College” persona or other virtual reality.

Social Utility Groups. At the University of Florida, students who turned down offers from more prestigious institutions because of the incentives of Florida’s “Bright Futures” scholarship program formed a social utility group. Thousands of students joined the group and included it in their online profiles. A message board allowed for communication within the group. College access marketing initiatives could use this model to market need-based scholarship programs as well.

Novelty Messaging. The marketing campaign for the movie *Snakes on a Plane* consisted of an interactive, personalized telephone and email service that allowed users to send customized messages in the voice of Samuel L. Jackson to friends and family. A famous athlete or performer could be cast for automated messages encouraging positive college-going behaviors.

Gaming Environments. Gaming is a popular, time-consuming and engaging activity for students of traditional college age. Information about college attendance could be creatively incorporated into video game software, or a college-going theme could be part of a video or computer game.

Interactive Promotions. The National CPA Student Recruitment initiative used an interactive website featuring personality tests, polls and games to get students interested in certified public accounting. A “Build a Record Label” promotion allowed teens to develop business skills, and a “Catch Me If You Can” game promoted forensic accounting. It reached more than 8 million high school students over two months. College access marketing might team up with specific professional organizations or institutions to promote their cause in a similar manner.

Merchandising. Florida’s “Truth” anti-tobacco campaign convened a summit of 500 young people and determined that merchandising was an important component of the campaign. “Truth” merchandise was distributed at events around the state. Popular, branded teen merchandise ensures that messages will be sustained and seen by the target population. More states should consider embedding fashionable, humorous or trendy clothing into campaigns.

Cross-Promotions. The U.S. military launched a recruiting campaign that incorporates a website, a youth-targeted magazine distributed to teachers and students, an IMAX film, and a prominent role for an Army instructor written into a new ESPN reality show. College access marketing should take a similarly multifaceted approach to reach tomorrow’s students.

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