Online Admissions and Internet Recruiting: An Anatomy of Search Engine Placement

Effective use of the Internet and search engines can be a valuable part of a university's recruitment strategy

By **Richard Whiteside** and **George S. Mentz**

Youth of today are strongly inclined to use the Internet to research colleges and universities. Children are trained to use the Internet beginning in grade school and will research and visit colleges from home or from libraries.[1] Discussions with recent high school graduates reveal that many prefer the privacy of searching online and using online forms. There is less interaction with people using this method—they simply fill out the information online.[2]

The Student Perspective

Those responsible for design and content of an institutional Web site should assume the mindset of the student. Most college marketing focuses on the product—the programs, majors, and services provided by the college. This approach often leads to a "so what?" reaction on the part of the student. A more effective approach is to focus on the benefits and value of the experience. Benefits must be articulated, and the connections that are intuitive to those inside the academy must be clearly identified for those unfamiliar with the academy. Illustrating those connections refocuses thinking in the desired direction.

Organizing the Site

Admissions sites face the challenge of incorporating necessary information while limiting clutter. The main page of

the admission and recruiting site should include information about benefits, accreditation, ranking or accolades, facilities, housing, tuition, value, location, phone numbers, and contact names. Program availability, institutional quality, location, and perceived value (the cost versus benefits analysis) are the institutional characteristics most often cited by prospective students as the key factors in deciding to apply or attend a particular institution. Information related to these topics should be placed on an introductory page for prospective students.

Most university Web sites are organized in "egocentric" fashion. That is, the organization of materials mirrors the institution's formal organization chart.

Arraying the information from the perspective of a student in the admission process makes a good deal more sense. The following array of institutional information, for example, is intuitive to most high school students in the admission process:

- Prospective students
- Applicants for admission
- Accepted students
- Enrolling students
- Enrolled students

While each of these major divisions may include certain redundancies, the added value of presenting the information in "process sequence" more than outweighs the overhead required by those redundancies.

Highlighting Benefits and Successes

The presentation of program options, location, and institutional rankings is a straightforward process. However, one of the most potent institutional selling points—the benefits derived from attendance—is often omitted from the information presented to the prospective student. Experience shows us that one of the most powerful recruitment approaches available is the presentation

of information documenting how past students and alumni have benefited from their association with the institution. This is done several ways.

- Add testimonials to the site—including pictures and statements—from powerful and successful alumni.[3]
- Show statistics of how alumni have fared in areas of salary and employment.
- Present the graduate and professional school placement record of graduates.
- Tie in academics, graduate programs, and other supplemental profit centers to the site.
- Show the enthusiasm for the university and show the success of the endowment.

In addition, colleges and universities should carefully market their professors. Many professors can attract students who want to take classes from them; savvy colleges capitalize on this by illustrating these professors, their publications, and their renowned research in their respective fields.

Ease of Contact

Large numbers of prospective students come to a Web site looking for an application to fill out or for an 800 number because they do not want to incur the cost to call admissions and ask questions or make requests. The ability for these students to find an application form, fill it out, send it online, and receive a response, confirmation, or feedback is fundamental to successful recruiting.

Items such as the application for admission, the list of majors, financial aid programs, and the institutional catalog are high-demand requests. Although a well-designed site could group these items by phase, they should be included on the top layer of the admission Web site as "process stage independent" selections.

Many colleges and universities have standard responses, often approved by the legal department, ready to be e-mailed or mailed to candidates. Some universities may use auto responders that send specific information to students who submit an e-mail that has certain questions checked (in check boxes or radio buttons) in the submission.[4]

Integrating the Financial Side

Admissions sites should contain clear information on how to apply, the process, and turnaround time on applications and on acceptance or rejection notices. Moreover, admissions sites must clearly explain the financial aid programs available to help the student finance the cost of attendance.

Because many students will self-select out of further consideration solely on the basis of published price, Web sites should present information on typical financial aid and net-cost scenarios (price less average financial aid) on the same page as published price. This approach may encourage some students to initiate a dialogue that would otherwise never take place.

Benefits of E-Mail

E-mail has allowed many colleges and universities to save on postage, labor, paper, printing expenses, and administrative time.[5] Today, a much higher percentage of the college-bound population have an e-mail address than just a few years ago, and those addresses are increasingly stable. E-mail provides a low-cost, high-speed, communication mechanism for colleges and universities. Several of the more common applications of e-mail in college recruitment include

1. Distribution of text documents such as PDF files for information pertaining to majors, financial aid, and others
2. Notification of incomplete applications, identifying the documents needed to complete the packet
3. Invitations for college-sponsored events with built in RSVP mechanisms
4. Market research surveys
5. Newsletters containing information related to campus events
6. Rich text format e-mail

The extent to which e-mail is used is limited only by the creativity of the admission department. Since the cost is extremely low, it is possible for the admission office to be in constant, interactive contact with members of the target population.

Having students request information and apply for admission using Web-based admission applications is another way to reduce hard copy expenses and use of paper. Similarly, these forms can be a way for IT to harvest e-mail addresses or other data for sending future mailings and updates.

Search Engines

Your institution's Web site should be easy to find by potential candidates and alumni on targeted search engines or directories. If you have followed the search engine industry, you know the growth and decline of search-engine and directory market share has been very dynamic. In an article[6] based on data from Neilson//NetRatings, Danny Sullivan, editor of SearchEngineWatch.com, described the market breakdown of major search engines and directories, along with exposure and overlap of Web surfers. Yahoo, MSN, AOL, Google, and a few others have the widest appeal to the potential recruiting market.

Variables such as domain name,[7] keyword-rich text, and meta tags in the HTML source code affect your college's exposure dramatically.[8] Search engines use different methods (algorithms[9]) of ranking and listing Web sites. Positive variables include the name of your domain and whether it is germane to the search terms, the title of the page, meta tags that include your site description and keywords, the text and content of the page, image file names, alt tag text, and link popularity.[10] Note, however, that search engines and directories change their algorithms and ranking criteria from time to time. Some major engines use a partner to provide search results, and search engines also change partners occasionally. Thus, the variables and algorithms are not static. IT staff, Webmasters, and college departments need to watch these factors actively and adjust search-engine ranking strategies accordingly.

Search engines that offer pay-for-inclusion or pay-per-performance programs, including Yahoo and Overture, have become increasingly important to Web site performance and targeted visitors. Sponsored listings with search engines such as Looksmart—which provides

results for MSN—and also Overture—which sponsors results for AOL and Yahoo—have become a potentially effective strategy because you have paid per click for visitors and for a listing on the first page of results. Search directories may list most Web pages for nonprofits and education or research institutions out of courtesy, allowing you to have all of your documents and pages on various search engines. This is part of the vital nature of having a proper title, text, content, and meta tag information for each link and page listed on your home page.

Designers of search-engine-friendly Web sites keep the following attributes in mind when building their sites:

■ *Title*. The title of each Web page should target a specific Web surfer audience.[11]

■ *Meta Tags*. These individualized tags should be in place on all university recruiting and other Web pages, regardless of how inconsequential the page might appear.

■ *Content.* The text of each page should be rich in keywords, with a target audience in mind.[12]

■ *Headings*. The headings and keyword-rich text should be closest to the top left of the page and be carefully used throughout the rest of the page.

■ *URL Names and Extensions*. The URL name is very important, but so too is the rest of the URL. For example, <http://www.tulane.edu/college ranking.html> could be picked up by a student searching for Tulane's Rank or college ranking in general.

Colleges and universities must maintain legal and ethical standards, however, while aggressively extolling the virtues of their campuses.[13] For instance, your Webmaster could easily target a competitor's candidates by creating code, keywords, and meta tags that would allow your site to show up when a student is searching for another college.[14]

Ranking and Recruitment

Because students are inclined to consider rankings in their choice of a school, colleges and universities should seek out all college ranking opportunities. High school students tend to use ranking systems to locate a particular institution within a broad category of similar institutions with regard to quality or value. In the student's mind, an institution's relative position on the continuum is determined by the company it keeps.

Rankings from *U.S. News and World Report*, *Business Week*, *Kiplinger*, *Petersons*, and *The Financial Times* currently carry the most weight. There are more unofficial rankings than you might imagine, however, and search engines sometimes give higher status to more obscure ranking sites than to *U.S. News and World Report* or *Business Week*, for example. Ranking is said to be unfair in many cases, but it is a great way to market your university.[15] Additionally, if you are ranked online, you usually have your Web site link listed.

Links and Link Popularity

One of the factors used by many search engines to rank sites is the number of links to your site from other sites. Some search engines pick up all links; however, many search engines only observe hyperlinks attached to text. Anyone affiliated with the university should be asked to add a university link to their Web site as part of an ongoing business relationship.

Partial List of Key Departments and Phrases

The list below indicates just some of the information that an institution should integrate with all Web pages related to the university Web site or admissions. A potential linguistic conflict arises, however, if users search for "football" or "free tuition" when the university uses the terms "athletics" and "financial aid" in its text and Web code. Colleges and universities must target the search engine "terms of art or keywords" that Internet users are likely to use.

■ Accreditation
■ All admissions information
■ IT, computers, and wireless capability
■ Disability services
■ International appeal or accreditation
■ Cultural aspects of your locale and university
■ Extracurricular programs of interest to students
■ Degree programs, degrees offered with majors of interest, and programs abroad
■ Financial aid/scholarships
■ Professors' and administrators' credentials
■ Grade curves or average GPA
■ Affirmative action and diversity
■ Athletics (then sport name)
■ *U.S. News and World Report* ranking
■ Number of students/enrollment
■ Dormitories, dorms, housing
■ Average or acceptable SAT or ACT score ranges
■ Advising
■ Safety
■ Total cost and pricing along with tuition and fees
■ Junior Year Abroad programs
■ AP or advanced placement examinations
■ Transfer credit, transfer courses
■ High school courses, course requirements
■ Personal essay requirement
■ Location, region, city, amenities (maps, visits, tours)
■ Mailing address, telephone numbers
■ Online course offerings and executive programs
■ FAQ, frequently asked questions, Q&A
■ Male-female ratio

Tying the Online Strategy Together

Several technical considerations can bring together the various facets of an effective, online recruitment strategy.

Links to Home Page

It is a good idea to consult your institution's administration and IT department about all other college departmental Web sites linking back to admissions. Many prospective students will arrive at a departmental Web site, having executed a search by discipline field. Working in conjunction with departmental Web sites will increase your exposure, and search engines will believe that your university is very popular because so many sites have a

link reference to your admissions department.

Load Times and Document Formats

We love beautiful graphics, pictures, fancy design, and Flash.[16] Students who live in rural areas or who use inexpensive computer systems, however, might use a dial-up Internet service provider that could take 30–45 seconds to download a graphics-heavy Web page. In such circumstances, the patience of many users is likely to run out. Further, if the user tries to access a document in a format the user's computer cannot translate, then you have definitely lost a prospect. If all of the forms and other information on your site are in Adobe or in a version of Word that a visitor to your site does not have, he or she might not have an hour to download the software to read your files.[17] Admissions sites should offer forms in several formats.

Statistics

Having access to statistical information for your Web sites will help you track yearly progress. This information will explain what part of the world your visitors are coming from, what other sites are sending you traffic, what documents prospects download most often, the average amount of time visitors spend on your site, and other information, such as errors or outages on your site.[18]

Simple Add-Ons

Many college and university Web sites overlook some easy add-ons that can make a big difference to prospective students surfing the Web. Making a site "sticky" is as important as building a site with good navigation, appealing graphics, and features friendly to search engines. Sticky simply means keeping people on your site longer because the site is interesting and has captured visitors' attention. Examples of simple add-on features include

- An "Add this site to your favorites" or a "Bookmark this site" button.
- A feature allowing site visitors to e-mail the Web address and site information to a friend.

- For schools that accept a large number of students from bilingual or non-English-speaking households, admissions and college information in languages other than English.

Finally, your domain name should be on everything from brochures and letterhead to licensed products and university trucks.[19] Most universities include the institution's URL and contact information on all hard-copy or electronic communications, but many overlook the issue of how easy the URL is to recall. The producers of marketing copy might want to include a mirror domain that uses a supplemental name or a dot-com extension.

In summary, universities that work in conjunction with Admissions and IT will succeed if they stay in tune with the present and future needs of today's high-school students. Online recruiting will continue to be a major facet of building and improving enrollment. Institutions that do not keep up with this marketing medium may lose market share and great opportunities for growth regionally and internationally. *e*

Endnotes

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Richard Whiteside is Vice President of Enrollment and Dean of Admissions, Tulane University, New Orleans. George S. Mentz (gm007 @bigfoot.com) is Assistant Professor of Legal Studies, Loyola University College of Business Administration, New Orleans.