

Social CRM in Higher Education

Introduction

Many colleges and universities employ sophisticated CRM (customer relationship management) tools to manage relationships with their constituents. Campuses use CRM to help recruit high-quality students, communicate with parents, manage relationships with current students, promote events, and keep in contact with alumni.

The growing popularity of Web 2.0 social network tools creates a new challenge for colleges. Many of their most important constituents, late-teen and early twenty-year olds, are abandoning traditional CRM media such as print, email, and telephones in favor of social media. Having invested heavily in CRM during the past decade campuses must now retool their communication strategies to incorporate social media. The integration of social networking sites into CRM systems is known as “Social CRM.”

Social networking sites include blogs, wikis, social bookmarking, consumer reviews, and video sharing. Table 1 provides a list of Web 2.0 tools and the names of popular web sites that provide these tools. The popularity of social software sites has increased dramatically in recent years. Four of the top ten most popular web sites in April 2012 are social software sites (Alexa.com, 2012).

Social software is very popular with college students. A 2007 survey of 31,500 first-year college students found that 94-percent used social networking sites at least weekly (Higher Education Research Institute, 2007). RateMyProfessors.com, a social networking site that allows anonymous ratings of professors, is visited by approximately 3 million college students each month. It claims to publish over 10 million student-generated ratings of more than one million professors (RateMyProfessors.com, 2010).

Table 1 – Web 2.0 Tools and Examples

Social Tool	Description	Popular Sites
Social Networking	Allows individuals and organizations to create a profile and join it to other profiles, thereby creating social networks.	Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn, Twitter, Friendster, Orkut, Google Buzz.
Blog	Allows individuals and organizations to easily publish text, images and videos to the web. “Blog” is a blend of the words “web log.”	Blogger, LiveJournal, Typepad, Travepods
Wiki	Similar to a blog but with better support for group collaboration. Wiki	Wikipedia, WikiTravel, WikiHow, WikiBooks,

	is “fast” in Hawaiian.	ProductWiki, WikiCars
Social Bookmarking	Allows individuals to share ratings, recommendations and comments on web pages.	Digg, del.icio.us, StumbleUpon, Yahoo!Buzz, Slashdot.
Consumer Reviews	Allows consumers to write reviews on products and services.	RateMyProfessors, Pick-a-prof, StudentsReview, Unigo, TheUniversityReview, Epinions, TripAdvisor, ConsumerReview, Amazon
Video sharing	Allows individuals to upload and share videos	YouTube, Break, MetaCafe, DailyMotion, blip.tv
Photo Sharing	Allows individuals to upload and share photos	PhotoBucket, Flickr, Picasa, WebShots, SmugMug

Social sites such as Facebook and RateMyProfessors.com have become virtual extensions of campus information systems. The sites provide information about specific campuses, academic programs and student reviews of individual professors. Information may be posted by students, alumni, faculty, prospective students, campus staff, and even individuals with no connection to the campus. Many admissions offices provide links from their web site directly to social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter and Linked In.

Social network sites do not provide campuses with the high degree of control offered by CRM tools. Most CRM tools send information directly to constituents and constituents then have the option of replying back directly to the sender. This one-to-one relationship provides campuses with a high degree of control over the message and the relationship. CRM tools were relatively easy for campuses to implement because they did not challenge the traditional paradigm of information flowing from the institution to students, parents and alumni. CRM tools allowed campuses to effectively manage their communications with constituents but they had little effect on the nature of information being delivered.

Web 2.0 tools are changing this dynamic. Students and other campus constituents are now creating web content and publishing it on the Internet where anyone can read it. They use social networking tools to share their opinions on every aspect of their college experience. They can go to StudentsReview.com and post their opinion about universities, to RateMyProfessors.com to comment on individual professors, tweet their opinions on dormitory food, write about most anything on their blog, and visit the university’s Facebook page and post comments and questions. All of these services are free and allow anonymous comments.

Social networking sites present both opportunities and threats to colleges and universities. The large quantity of timely information available to students, faculty and administrators has the

potential to increase student satisfaction, build brand loyalty and improve the quality of the college experience. They also allow for greater student participation in campus decision-making and can increase student engagement. However compared to traditional CRM tools social media transfer control of the message from campuses to constituents.

This paper explores the opportunities, risks and management issues that Web 2.0 tools bring to higher education. It also discusses how Social CRM systems can be used to monitor constituent sentiment on social networks. It focuses on commercial social networking sites that have a significant impact on many campuses, such as Facebook, YouTube, RateYourProfessor, Twitter and LinkedIn.

Web 2.0 tools have also been integrated into teaching and learning on campus. This aspect of social tools has been discussed extensively by other authors (Alexander, 2006; Craig, 2007; Eijkman, 2008; Couros, 2009) and is not addressed in this paper.

Opportunities

Social networking sites can provide an effective and inexpensive way for campuses to promote campus programs and reach out to prospective students, current students, alumni, sports fans and the broader campus community. Many campuses currently have official pages on social sites such as Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn. The Facebook pages of some universities have over 100,000 fans, including those of the University of Kansas, University of Florida, Texas A&M, and the University of Texas at Austin. University athletic pages are even more popular. The Facebook pages for both the Ohio State Buckeyes and the Minnesota Vikings have over a million fans (as of April 2012).

Besides having a potentially large reach, another significant benefit of commercial social networking sites to campuses is that they are low cost. Most commercial social networking sites are supported by advertising and are free to users. CRM systems, in contrast, can cost tens- to hundreds-of-thousands of dollars for a sophisticated system that is integrated into the campus information system. This is a major advantage for educational institutions with limited marketing budgets. Providing quality content can be expensive, but the cost is relatively modest compared to CRM tools.

The low cost of creating pages on commercial social networking sites allows campuses and campus organizations to create multiple sites targeted at specific audiences. Many campuses have dozens of Facebook pages. Some are "official" pages administered by staff members in admissions, athletics, libraries or marketing. Others are "unofficial" pages that are created and managed by student clubs, alumni associations, dormitories, campus food services, academic departments, and even by people with no connection to the campus. The ability of anyone to

create a page that appears to represent a campus is problematic and is addressed later in this article.

Most campuses endeavor to attract the highest quality students and many have enlisted social networking sites to help achieve this goal. YouTube allows campuses to create “channels” (www.youtube.com/education) for their video collections. Campuses can design the home page for their channel and include a school logo, navigation to different campus video collections, and provide links to their other new social networks such as Facebook and Twitter. YouTube users can join YouTube channels to receive periodic email updates on new channel content. Some of these channels are quite popular. As of November 2010, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) channel had 1,235 videos and over 19 million views.

The period immediately after sending acceptance letters to prospective students is a critical time for campuses. Top students are likely to be accepted by several schools and the role of admissions offices changes from screening to recruiting. Many admissions offices have recognized that this is a critical time to develop a “relationship” with prospective students and often use their CRM systems to manage a barrage of letters, brochures, and phone calls. Social networking sites are increasingly being added to the usual recruiting tools. Campuses will create Facebook pages specifically for groups of accepted students and will invite students to join the group in their acceptance letters. Group members can post questions about a campus, receive answers from campus staff members, current students, alumni or other prospective students, read other prospective students’ questions, and answer questions from other prospective students. Admissions staff will often post promotional photos and videos on the page.

Prospective students particularly like to communicate with current students about their campus experience. Some campuses meet this need by hiring students to tell their stories. For instance, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) Office of Admissions sponsors a student blog titled “MIT Admissions web portal and community” that publishes posts from MIT students and admissions officers (www.mitadmissions.org). The blog posts and articles are targeted at prospective students. MIT student bloggers are paid \$10 an hour, up to four hours a week, to write about their lives at MIT (Lewin, 2009). Blog topics cover a wide range of student experiences, including posts about MIT’s Anime Club, how to apply, workload, professor accessibility, campus food, and the friendliness of MIT students.

Most commercial social networking sites use an opt-in membership model. This model requires individuals to agree to join a group. Since members of campus networks have opted-in to the campus network they are more likely to be receptive to campus promotions and more interested in campus events than those who have not. Individuals may also be more motivated to follow campus news and events when they see that their friends are part of the network.

The opt-in feature and the lure of joining friends help make social networks a powerful marketing tool.

Network members can also opt-out, sometimes known as “unfriending” or “unliking.” To minimize their attrition rate campuses must provide content that is interesting and relevant to the group. Typical campus content includes updates on sports teams, student programs, awards, events and other promotional information. It is also important not to update too frequently. Too many updates can be perceived as spam-like and may encourage people to “unlike” the campus page.

The major social networking sites utilize sophisticated, yet subtle, marketing tactics designed to increase both membership and member activity. Such marketing efforts also benefit campuses with pages on these sites. Major sites like Facebook and LinkedIn make it very easy to invite friends to join. Facebook has a tool that sends invitations to all of the addresses in an individual’s email address book. Facebook also sends “your friends miss you” promotional emails to people after periods of inactivity. These marketing tools have helped Facebook quadruple its size during the two-year period from 2008 through 2010 to over 100 million users (Nielsen Company.com, 2010). This marketing benefits campuses by making membership to social networking sites almost ubiquitous among the college-aged population.

Some commercial networking sites provide market intelligence data that can help campuses evaluate the effectiveness of their pages and content updates. Detailed usage reports provide valuable feedback on how network members are reacting to content. Administrators of Facebook pages, for instance, can access a feature called “Insights” that provides a graph of active users, “likes” buttons clicked, number of comments, number of people who have unsubscribed, and other statistics. The availability of such real-time statistics provides useful insights into what types of information appeal to group members.

In a 2009 interview with *Inside Facebook*, Stanford University’s Director of Internet Media Outreach, Ian Hsu, said that the University closely follows reactions to new postings and has developed a strategy based upon these observations. It has found that fans respond positively to people-centered content. Consequently the University started a monthly “Open Office Hours Series” on its Facebook page, where a faculty member posts a short video about his or herself and group members can then post questions to the faculty member. The questions are answered by the faculty member via subsequent videos. This approach has been very successful; Stanford experienced a significant increase in Facebook fans following the announcement of its “Open Office Hours” with popular and well-known professors (Lee, 2009).

Some commercial social networking sites allow page administrators to control the types of access available to users. Facebook provides administrators the ability to delete posts and

configure options determining who can join the group, view group content, post comments, and upload photos and videos. Campuses can configure the security features to be appropriate for the purpose of the group. For instance, if a group has been created for prospective students, it might be appropriate to allow all group members to post questions and respond to posts. Such a group may have active discussions in which all members can participate. Conversely, a sport team page with hundreds of thousands of fans would likely have more restrictive read-only settings.

On-line peer reviews of campuses, courses and professors are very popular with students. Consumers tend to believe that reviews posted by peers are trustworthy, so reviews provided by other students can be quite influential. A 2007 survey conducted by the Nielsen Company of over 26,000 Internet users found that the most trusted sources of recommendations were from consumer opinions posted online (Luhn, 2008).

Students may be correct in their trust of campus review web sites. A recent study by Coladarci and Kornfield (2007) found a significant correlation (0.68) between evaluations on RateMyProfessors.com and in-class student evaluations of teaching. Student reviews posted on social networking sites are considered to be reliable enough that the influential annual college rating, "America's Best Colleges," by Forbes derives 25-percent of its weighting from student satisfaction with course instruction as reported on RateMyProfessors.com (Forbes Center for College Affordability and Productivity, 2009).

Campuses can also benefit from viral marketing tied to social network sites. Viral marketing occurs when people recommend a video, web site or other media to their friends or members of their social networks. For instance, a YouTube video produced for orientation week in September 2009 at the University of Quebec in Montreal has been viewed over 10 million times. The video, which features 172 students lip-syncing a song by the Black Eyed Peas, was featured on CNN and within a week it had been viewed one million times (Joly, 2009). The video positively portrays both the campus facilities and the creativity of its students.

The low cost, large audiences, free marketing, and broad acceptance of peer reviews make social network sites a very attractive communication tool. However they are not without hazards for campuses. The next section describes some of the risks associated with social networking sites and how campuses can mitigate them.

Risks and Costs of Social Networking

While social networking sites provide campuses with an effective new channel of communication, they also present challenges related to lack of control, privacy, misinformation, negative information, misrepresentation, slander, lack of accountability, and lack of integration with CRM systems. Campuses invest heavily in faculty, facilities, research, career services,

sports and marketing in an effort to bolster their reputations. Yet reputations are easily damaged and social networking sites can provide a highly visible platform for critics. Disgruntled individuals can create social networking groups to criticize almost every aspect of a campus, from the campus itself to its professors, courses, sports teams, food, parking, campus, students, etc.

Unlike CRM tools, with social networking sites campuses have little control over the message. Many sites allow anonymous contributions and publish content with no editorial review. Some sites allow offensive content to be flagged by users, but negative and inaccurate comments may be posted for years and be seen by thousands of people. Most review sites do not provide a forum for rebuttal, and even if they did, the large number of reviews and review sites makes it difficult and expensive for campuses to monitor.

Several college review sites are available that allow anonymous comments and promote the fact that their reviews are from other students. A typical tagline is “College students tell you what the colleges won’t” (Unigo.com). These sites make little or no effort to screen the sources of the reviews, which may be written by current or former students, rejected applicants, students from rival schools, or people with no connection to the campus. According to one site, StudentsReview.com, campus admissions offices have written reviews promoting their own schools while disparaging competing schools (StudentsReview.com, 2010).

Despite the lack of quality control, college review sites are quite popular. CollegeProwler.com claims to have over 150,000 student reviews of 6,900 schools and StudentsReview.com claims over 20 million visits per year (as of November 2010). StudentsReview.com allows reviewers to assigned letter grades (A through F) to campuses, and displays a colorful pie chart for each campus indicating the percentage of students who say they would return to the school.

Campuses have little recourse if they are not happy with the reviews. StudentsReview.com acknowledges that at least three campuses have sued to have negative reviews removed its site (StudentsReview.com, 2010). It also cites several legal opinions that it claims provide it with legal immunity against lawsuits from disgruntled campuses and faculty.

Campuses also must watch for imposters that create “official” campus groups. It is easy for shady marketers to create such groups and then utilize them for marketing products and collecting information. In 2008, for instance, campus officials discovered dozens of Facebook “Class of 2013” groups that were created by non-students (Stripling, 2008). Many of the pages claimed to be “official groups” and utilized campus logos and other copyrighted materials to create the appearance of legitimacy. Officials from several campuses investigated the origins of the pages and identified a single creator. With pressure from these campuses, he eventually removed the pages.

Privacy and the selling of personal information are major concerns surrounding social networking sites. Facebook, in particular, has been widely criticized for its weak privacy protections. When campuses create groups and encourage their constituents to join them, they may be inadvertently helping marketers harvest personal information. A Wall Street Journal investigation in October 2010 found that "...marketers are spying on Internet users - observing and remembering people's clicks, and building and selling detailed dossiers of their activities and interests..." (Steel and Fowler, 2010). The investigation found that several applications on Facebook provided people's names, and in some cases their friends' names, to dozens of advertising and internet-tracking companies. The information was sold regardless of user privacy settings (Steel and Fowler, 2010). By inviting prospective students to join their Facebook groups, campuses may become unintentional accomplices to information harvesting by marketers.

Social networks also have privacy implications for faculty. RateMyProfessors.com allows anonymous individuals to write reviews on faculty members. The popular site has over 11 million comments on one million instructors and receives over 3.2 visits per month (Dawson, 2010). The site makes no effort to verify that reviewers have actually taken a course from the instructor or that they are even students. An anonymous writer can post defamatory comments about a professor that may be viewed by thousands of people. The faculty member may not even be aware of the comment and, even if s/he is aware of it, has little recourse other than to post a rebuttal on the site. The president of RateMyProfessors.com said that the company does not honor requests to correct inaccurate statements "...because students are protected by the First Amendment..." (Jaschik, 2006). The site also allows students to upload photographs of professors without individual or campus permission.

Social networking sites can also become a forum for publicizing embarrassing campus incidents. A videotaped lecture broadcast by a student of the University of Florida shows an apparently stoned professor teaching an introductory management course, with over 1,000 students in attendance. Highlights of the lecture were anonymously uploaded to YouTube and have been viewed over two million times, as of April 2012. Soon after the video went viral the professor was put on administrative leave and another instructor was assigned to teach the course (Thacker, 2006).

Another challenge created by Web 2.0 tools is that they can be labor intensive to manage effectively. Many campuses maintain a presence on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube and other popular on-line social networking sites. These sites require frequent updates with fresh content about events, sports, campus news, awards, contests, and other campus-related information. Questions and observations posted by users must be monitored and addressed in a timely manner or the institution may seem uncaring.

Leveraging Benefits and Mitigating Risks

Social networking sites are likely to continue their growth and campuses need to have a strategy for leveraging their benefits while mitigating their potential risks. Opting out of social networking is not a good strategy for most campuses since prospective students may perceive such campuses to be out-of-touch or disinterested. Ignoring commercial social networking also increases the risk that an imposter will create an “official” campus site and exploit it for marketing purposes.

While commercial social networking sites are a relatively inexpensive way to build a relationship with campus constituents, fully realizing their potential does require skill and ongoing effort. Campus pages must be updated with fresh and compelling content. Some campuses have hired marketing professionals with titles like “Director of Internet Media Outreach” to manage campus networking pages and align their content with other branding efforts (Lee, 2009). One quarter of all college admission offices offer blogs written by either campus officials or students (Bombardieri, 2007). Some campuses, including MIT and Cornell, pay students to write blogs about them, while others rely upon volunteers.

Campus blogs can be very effective recruiting tools. They help prospective students and their parents gain a realistic view of campus life. A survey of admitted students at MIT found that blogs were among the top three most useful factors influencing their decision to apply or accept an admissions offer (Bombardieri, 2007).

Campuses that use paid bloggers must be careful to disclose the relationship. People do not like to be deceived and retribution via social networking site can be brutal. Several companies have been caught promoting themselves under false identities and have been severely criticized by angry customers (Hoffman and Fodor, 2010).

The greatest challenges faced by campuses from commercial networking sites are lack of control and anonymity. One countermeasure that campuses can take to address these issues is to host their own social networking sites. Campus-operated sites may require users to authenticate before posting and/or reading content, and can hold individuals accountable for slanderous, racist, sexist and other inappropriate postings. Campuses can also remove offensive content. Such internally hosted sites may allow users to create anonymous public user IDs, but warn users that their real identity is known and they will be held responsible for offensive content.

Internally hosted social networking sites can also be beneficial to students and faculty. Authentication provides a safer environment because all users are members of the campus community and can be held responsible for their postings. Consequently internally hosted sites may have higher quality content.

Two examples of internally hosted networking sites are “Viking Village” at Western Washington University and “Factrak” at Williams College. Viking Village (forum.wwu.edu/about) is an online forum supported by the University that receives over 9,800 unique visitors per week (Peterson, 2010). Factrak (wso.williams.edu/wso/services/about) is an online course evaluation system that is operated by a student organization. Many Williams’ students say that they prefer the in-house system to RateMyProfessors.com because it verifies that the comments are from William’s students (Epstein, 2006).

Campuses can also counter the problem of anonymous instructor reviews by publishing the student course evaluations that they routinely collect for internal use. This approach assures that the reviewers have actually taken the course and it provides a more representative sample of students. Many campuses obtain instructor consent before publicly publishing evaluations while others require faculty to petition the University to have their course evaluations withheld (Epstein, 2006).

Social CRM on Campus

Social CRM is a relatively new set of CRM tools that allows organizations to monitor comments on social network sites. Monitoring comments on all the social networking sites can be time consuming and it is easy to miss important trends. Social CRM tools allow campus administrators to monitor relevant conversations and adjust their activities and public communications appropriately.

Many large consumer product companies use social CRM to monitor consumer sentiment and alert them to potential problems. Microsoft, for instance, uses a service from Visible Technologies to track approximately 3,000 blog and forum posts each day. The company then responds to 30 to 60 of the comments each day. Such monitoring services can cost up to \$200,000 annually (Brandel, 2010).

Social CRM tools are relatively new and have not yet been widely adopted by college campuses. The high cost of implementing Social CRM is a significant barrier. However their cost will decline as the tools are more widely adopted and integrated into major CRM products. Campus administrators will also be watching to see how the data produced by social CRM systems can be utilized to strengthen relationships with campus constituents.

Conclusion

Social networking sites provide campuses with powerful and inexpensive tools for augmenting their existing CRM systems. They provide a powerful new channel for connecting with their broad range of constituents. Some campuses have embraced social networking and have created large networks of people who follow campus events, sports, and academics. Many

campuses also use social networking to create relationships with prospective students and their parents.

Because of their broad reach and the lack of campus control, social networking sites can also pose significant risks to campuses. Anonymous critics can reach a large audience and campuses often have little recourse. They also provide a highly visible venue for embarrassing videos, campus scandals, lawsuits, and other campus dirty laundry. Social CRM systems can help campuses spot such trends quickly and facilitate a quick response.

Campuses are still experimenting with social networking content and are adopting Social CRM tools to help them better monitor their messages. The social network landscape is evolving rapidly and approaches that are effective this year may be outdated by next year. To fully utilize these new tools campuses need to invest time and talent to develop social networks and provide them with appropriate and compelling content.

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