

## Recruitment tech

*Making the grade with social media*

BY Z. KELLY QUEIJO

Digital media, online chats, social networks, Twitter, Facebook, MySpace, e-mail, YouTube...the laundry list of Web-based tools available to help colleges and universities recruit new students is growing faster than you can say, "Tumble dry on low." And, just like the laundry, they can't be ignored.

When it comes to enrolling the next class of college freshmen, marketing typically falls into phased cycles of outreach beginning with recruitment, followed by the application cycle, and ending with the yield phase. For most schools, the goal of the recruitment phase is to get prospective students to visit the campus and, ultimately, to fill out an application for admission.

Shannon Brennan, director of media relations at Lynchburg College, reports, "We're still pretty new at the expanding technology opportunities. We've been using Facebook since 2007, but e-mail is still the most effective marketing tool."

At Hollins University, social media networks reign with MySpace, Facebook and Twitter followed by YouTube and blogging. Jeff Hodges, director of public relations, says, "A number of our undergraduate students, including traditional age, adult students enrolled in our Horizon program and students who are studying abroad blog on our Web site (www.hollins.edu). We have been very pleased with Facebook. It has helped grow participation in the Nancy Thorp Poetry Contest, and has generated increased interest in both 'Hollinsummer' and the

Batten Leadership Institute. We are also encouraged by the number of hits our YouTube channel has generated."

Virginia Tech is also enjoying success on the school's YouTube site (www.youtube.com/virginiatech), which features student profiles and hosts an invitation for students who have accepted the offer of admissions to upload their acceptance video called "It's Official—I'm a Hokie." The University Relations department also hosts "HokieCast" featuring podcasts made by students for students on the VTNews Web page.

Amy Widner, public relations coordinator for undergraduate admissions at Virginia Tech, adds "Most of what we are doing is linking to things University Relations is providing, using Twitter and YouTube. We have chosen not to take part in online college fairs, as we are only seeking growth in specific areas and are not looking to increase general exposure." Widner anticipates adding blogs to the admissions Web site next year.

Recruitment marches on at Virginia Military Institute. According to Stewart D. MacInnis, lieutenant colonel, USAR (Ret.) and acting director of communications and marketing, "VMI has found success with a different approach that allows them to target their prospects. We use PURLs—personalized URLs—in mailings to high school juniors. This directs them to a Web site that is personalized for them, which launches with a short flash video, goes to a

welcome letter that invites them to an Alumni recruiting event, and then moves to a survey form." The survey form is pre-populated with information the students are asked to verify and they can add information about their interests. The data collected from the short survey provides enough information to tailor future mailings.

VMI is also exploring the addition of blogs, Facebook and Twitter. MacInnis says, "We're trying to figure out how we can appropriately staff whatever we do before we get into it. It's not realistic for us to try to use our cadets to keep up a blog, for example, because of the tremendous demands placed on their time already. You can always find one cadet who will do it well, but then after their time, it's hard to find someone to fill in behind them. I'm worried about the lack of consistency. We don't have the staff to provide sufficient oversight of social media, and in the current economy we have no prospect of bringing on a new employee."

Roanoke College has incorporated text messaging into their recruitment mix and anticipates adding online chat to its Web site later this year.

Whitney Anderson, Roanoke College's Internet communications manager, gives Facebook her thumbs up. "We are most pleased with our ability to connect with students on Facebook in a variety of ways. We're particularly pleased with the results of a private group we created on Facebook for accepted students only [Class of 2013]. As of today, there are 555 members in the group and there

have been 355 wall posts and 664 discussion posts. It's a very active group and you can tell how excited they all are to begin their life at college."

There's also excitement afoot—make that "paw," at the University of Virginia—thanks to Jeannine Lalonde's Golden Retriever, "CavDog" (a.k.a. "Baxter"). Lalonde, assistant dean of admissions, blogs about the adventures of CavDog as he meets prospective students at events such as the Days on the Lawn and other university functions. CavDog is also featured in the thumbnail photo for the Dean's Twitter posts.

While the traditional prospective student letter and campus brochure have been replaced by e-mail and social media at many schools, social media did not make the list at James Madison University. Joe Manning, associate director of undergraduate admissions, says his office has stuck with the "tried and true" methods of communication: letters and e-mail. "While we're highly automated in the admissions application process, we're not Twittering and not on Facebook. We're of the opinion that social networking is the student's personal/private, non-college space," Manning says.

When it comes to admissions recruiting, it's a lot like sorting the laundry: you have to decide among what to keep, what to toss, what needs cleaning and, most importantly, what still fits.

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