



A President's Primer on Developing an Effective Web Strategy (or 10 things you need to understand before you spend another dime on your Web site)

This White Paper is designed to outline the major elements of a comprehensive Web strategy so presidents and other senior decision-makers have a better understanding of how to plan, implement, fund, and evaluate their Web initiatives. This paper's initial orientation is simple: For most colleges and universities, the Web has one major role, to support student recruiting.

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THINK OF YOUR WEB AS AN INVESTMENT

All of us make investments. And if we really listen to the advice from Charles Schwab, Maria Bartiromo, and Peter Lynch, we make these investments carefully, in equities we thoroughly understand, with people we trust, and with a certain rate of return in mind.

Of course, we are not always as rational as we might hope. We buy stocks based on tips from friends we talk to at parties or from short articles we read in *USAToday*. We sometimes act impulsively because we think if we don't act quickly, we might miss out on something hot. And when we buy a bad stock, we might hang on to it for too long because we are reluctant to admit that we made a mistake.

Investing in a Web strategy is no different than investing in the market. We impulsively buy this feature because it catches our eye. We decide on that strategy because the college down/up/across the street just did something so we need to respond. Our IT people clamor for the latest bell or whistle and we respond. All in all, more emotion than strategy, more reaction than careful planning.

A PROACTIVE STANCE

As you think about developing a comprehensive Web strategy, begin by using a basic asset allocation model (isn't this a great analogy?) to explore how your Web initiatives fit into the other marketing investments you have made. Ask yourself:

- Are all our individual marketing investments made with a larger, institution-wide marketing strategy in mind?
- Do we have a clear integrated marketing communications plan?
- Are our marketing efforts managed by a single portfolio manager or do we have individual fund managers—sometimes with different goals—all clamoring for our time and attention?

Now that you have established the larger view, focus on your Web and ask yourself:

- Why are we investing our scarce dollars in a Web strategy?
- What kind of return are we expecting?
- How can we monitor whether or not our Web investment is paying off?

Finally, look at your dollar cost averaging. If you invest significant dollars in your Web strategy on a hit-or-miss or periodic basis, you will likely overspend. A better strategy is to budget regular amounts for continual improvement.

Until you sort through the answers to these questions, don't spend a dime on your Web. Find someone on your campus or hire a consultant to help you gain some altitude on the problem. Zoom up to 32,000 feet and undertake a marketing audit, or at least a Web audit, so that you can develop a Web plan that is nestled appropriately in your larger integrated marketing communications plan.

The Web audits conducted by Stamats, for example, address three broad functions:

- **An integrated marketing and recruiting assessment** that examines how well your Web strategy is integrated into your larger marketing communication flow
- **A technical assessment** that looks at your site's content, architecture, navigation, usability, and naming conventions
- **A creative assessment** that evaluates how well you integrate your Web into your larger IT infrastructure and how well you capture, manage, and use data¹

An examination of these three mainstays of an effective Web strategy will help you quickly discern what is working and what is not.

Now that we have the larger view in place, let's look at 10 ideas that will improve your overall Web strategy.

1. FOCUS ON THE SINGULAR ROLE OF YOUR WEB SITE

Before I delve any deeper into this White Paper, I want to make sure that we are clear about the purpose of your Web site. It is not about this technology or that feature. It is not about promoting this program or that event. It is not about telling and selling and yelling. Rather, it is all about building community; it is about creating a relationship between your institution and your most important audiences—prospective students, alumni, donors, and others.

The idea of a Web site as a community builder presents a dramatic change in orientation for many colleges and universities. The old marketing model, the model with which most colleges and universities are familiar, was based on an inside/outside orientation that stressed:

- Who we are
- What we know (the target audience)
- What we want you to know about us
- What we like
- What we believe
- What we want you to do

This model was all about what we (colleges) wanted. The emergent model is based on an outside/inside orientation; it is more interested in

what students and other target audiences want. It focuses on:

- Who you (your audiences) are
- What you know
- What you want us to know
- What you like
- What you believe
- What you want us to do

As you can see, this model has a completely different perspective. It acknowledges, to a much larger degree, the customer and has as its goal the building of a relationship.

Let me give you an example of how you can use your site to build relationships. Recently, Stamats completed a wonderful micro site for Furman University (we will explore micro sites a little later in this paper). That site included a section called "Student diaries." We asked current Furman students to keep an online diary page of their Furman experience so prospective students would have a better idea of what it was like to attend Furman. The students even used digital cameras to post photographs onto their diary pages. As expected, prospective students loved this feature and the site was an overwhelming success. What we didn't expect, however, was how much Furman alumni would use this feature. They couldn't resist comparing their Furman experience with that of current students. The ongoing e-mail between current students and alumni has helped build the Furman community.

¹If you are interested in a Web audit, please let me know. You can e-mail me at bob.sevier@stamats.com.

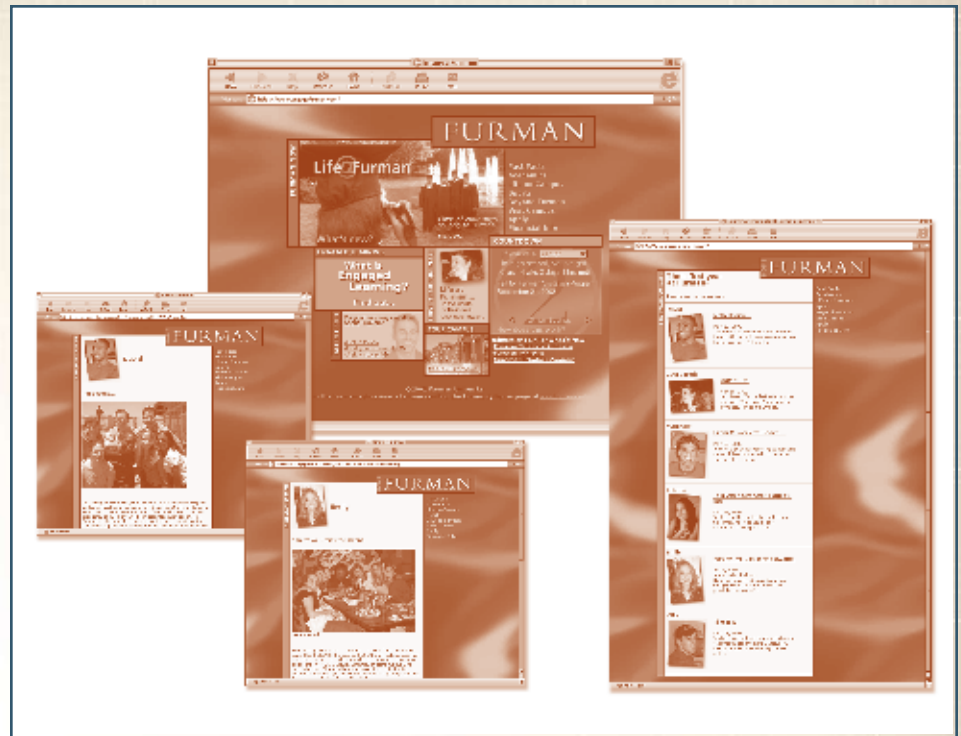
This Web portal, and the recruiting publications that support it, are built around an important theme, “My Albion.” Prospective students clearly enjoy and appreciate the personal nature of their Albion Web site.

2. DEVELOP A PLAN

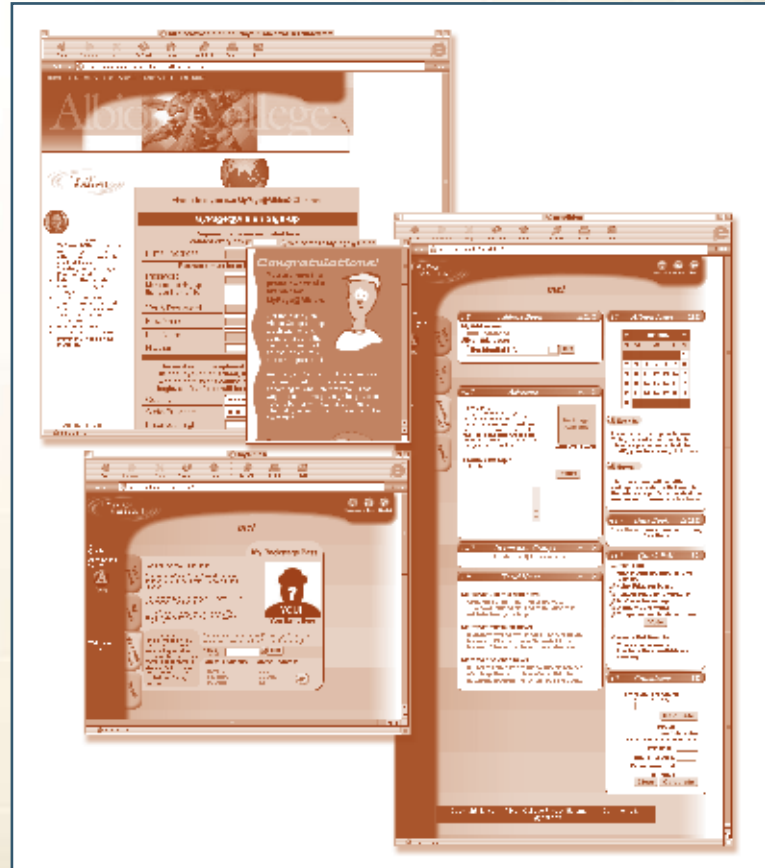
As with any important undertaking, you are more likely to achieve your Web goal if you begin with a simple planning process. When I am counseling clients on their Web strategy, I use a five-letter acronym—SCANR—to help me keep things on track.

First, what is your **strategy**? What are you trying to accomplish? Recruit students? Build bridges with your alumni? Keep your on-campus constituencies informed? When you have a better sense of the overall purpose of your site, you immediately have a better understanding of how you should shape your Web strategy. At this point, you must identify your most important audience. While all audiences are important, ask yourself which one is most important. Typically, it will be prospective students. Now that your purpose and most important audience have been clarified, it is time to move to the next step.

Content is all about creating relevance. Fortunately, because you now know which audience (or audiences) is most important, you are in a perfect position to ask them what kind of resources and information they want to find on your site. This simple step is the shortest pathway to creating content that is relevant. Ask them what they value. Ask them what resources would



If you want to check out the diaries, click on <http://www.engagefurman.com>. Chances are you will be hooked as well.



For another example of an excellent community builder, take a look at <http://www.myalbion.edu>.

keep them returning again and again. Ask them what other sites they value highly and then spend time looking at those sites.

Third, lay out your site **architecture**. At its most basic, architecture is all about how Web sites are organized; kind of like the floor plan of a house. As you think about architecture, remember to design your site with your audience in mind. One of the biggest mistakes that colleges make is to organize their site like they organize their institution. Most prospective students wouldn't know a provost if they bumped into one in your parking lot. And they aren't all that interested in your library and probably care very little about your mission statement. They are keenly interested, however, in what kinds of students attend your institution and what your dorms look like and what kind of food is available in the snack bar from midnight to four a.m. on weeknights. Remember, your goal is to meet their needs for information and community, not your need to promote.

Fourth, your **navigation** must be intuitive. Make the titles and buttons and navigation aids simple and obvious. Use the naming conventions used by your competitors. Call your majors just that—*majors*—not “curricular areas of investigation.” Remember that students, donors, parents, alumni, and other human beings generally don't scroll as much as they click. Eric Sickler, a colleague from Stamats, reminds us that students don't compare your site to other college or university sites. Rather, their expectations are shaped largely by non-educational Web sites

like those developed by Amazon, Yahoo!, ESPN, The Gap, and MTV. These sites stress intuitive navigation and dynamic content.

Want to test your content and navigation? Gather a dozen prospective students in one of your computer labs so each student has their own computer. Before you ask them to explore your site, have them write on a slip of paper the one thing they are most interested in finding out about you. Then tell them that once they have found that one thing, they should stand up and leave the room. Ten minutes later, a fair number of students are probably still sitting there looking for that one thing. In this test situation they will probably hammer away for a while. In real life, they would have moved on to the next college on their list.

And finally, you must be able to calculate a **return on your investment**. This means that you began with a goal in mind and that you introduced measures and opportunities to evaluate the success of your Web strategy. Basic hit rates are one thing. Knowing how students accessed your site, which pages they frequented, how often they returned, and whether or not they ultimately enrolled is much more valuable.

3. CLARIFY WHO IS RUNNING THE SHOW

Symphonies only have one conductor, and in many respects your Web strategy, with its many orchestrated components, is appropriately viewed as a symphony. On most campuses, your Web strategy

should be conducted by the same person who leads your overall marketing strategy. Generally, this is not someone from IT. In the old days, when the Web was new and speed was measured in baud rates, the IT people were the only ones who could decipher the technology. Now, if your Web site contains technology that only your IT people understand, you are probably heading for trouble. Do prospective students and other key audiences a big favor and put a professional communicator in charge of your site. Have IT play a support role, but make it clear who is in charge.

I can't resist passing on a one-liner I heard a while ago. A seasoned veteran of the Web wars said, “Putting your IT person in charge of your Web site is like putting your printer in charge of your communication strategy.” Obviously this is overstating the case, but the question remains, by how much?

Now that we have made the case for having a senior marketing person head the Web team, let's take a look at the team. Again, as with previous articles on team-based projects, I use the term, “team” quite deliberately. I am not interested in a committee. Committees are too fractious, don't always know why they are meeting, and generally have trouble making a timely decision.

Rather than a committee I suggest a team that represents, but doesn't always include, key campus stakeholders. However, this representation must always be tempered through the overarching

goal of the Web strategy and team: To help the college or university more effectively use the Web to recruit students. In this manner, the question isn't how to accommodate faculty who want a Web site. Rather, the question is how to best position faculty on the Web to improve recruiting. Every idea, every option, every inclusion must pass this basic litmus test: Does it help us build a relationship with prospective students? If it doesn't, it doesn't get on the main Web page.

Your Web team must have the clear and demonstrated support of the president. In particular, the president must give the team:

- A clear goal
- Concrete and simple guidelines for creating and approving content
- Sufficient time and money
- Authority to do the job

One client, Midwestern University, even has a mission statement for its Web team. That statement is:

The University recognizes the World Wide Web as a powerful marketing tool for our institution and an innovative educational resource for our students and faculty. The University is committed to utilizing the Web to achieve the goals of enhancing student recruitment, broadening our public relations efforts, maintaining connections with alumni, facilitating communications for all of our campus constituents, and providing educational tools for our students and faculty.

In addition to overseeing the creation of the Web strategy, the team must also oversee your site's maintenance. This requires the creation of an Internet policy so that your Web guidelines are thoughtfully created, consistently enforced, and carefully monitored. Karen Johnson, Vice President for University Relations at Midwestern University, reminds us that the creation of a Web policy is more of a process than an event, and that it can be as dynamic and ongoing as your Web site.

4. ONE SPOKE IN A LARGER WHEEL

In my opening paragraphs I mentioned a need to look at your entire marketing portfolio before making decisions on any one marketing investment. I would like to expand that theme for a moment.

For the most part, your Web strategy is one of the direct marketing elements of a larger integrated marketing communications strategy. As you can see from the diagram on the right, direct marketing is flanked on the one side by brand marketing and on the other by customer relationship management.²

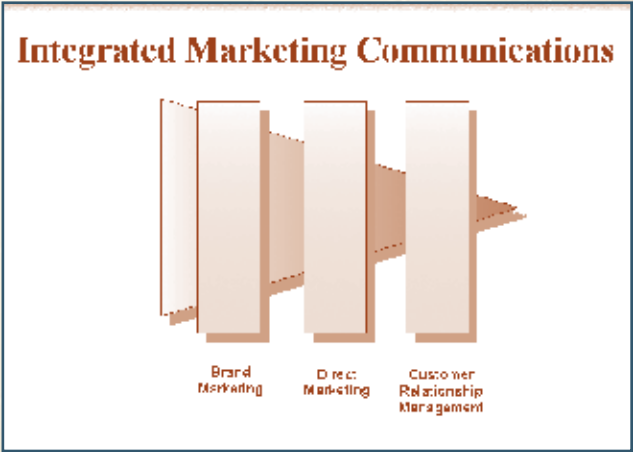
Brand marketing is all about creating awareness in the minds of your most important audiences. Direct marketing, on the other hand, is about initiating action. Customer relationship management is all about

building loyalty. If I might use an analogy, brand marketing is Ford telling people that "Quality is Job One!" Direct marketing is all about selling a Taurus. The third element, customer relationship marketing, is asking the customer, "Based on your experience with the Taurus, can I interest you in a Lincoln?"

For your Web strategy to be effective it must be preceded by a great brand marketing strategy that builds awareness, and it must be followed by a great customer relationship management strategy. You cannot talk about one, you cannot develop one, you cannot refine one, without talking about, developing, and refining the other two.

5. JUST BECAUSE YOU BUILD IT DOESN'T MEAN THEY WILL COME

"If you build it, they will come." That wonderful line from *Field of Dreams* is sometimes true in real life. It is not, however, ever true when it comes to your Web page. Colleges and universities routinely spend tens of thousands of dollars making their Web sites more interactive, more



²This diagram also appeared in our previous White Paper on branding. You can download this paper and a companion paper at www.stamats.com/whitepapers.

Establish the Web as your center of gravity

It is clear that the Web is here to stay. And for those of us whose love affair with print is not over, this can be troubling. But the fact is, most colleges and universities cannot afford both a comprehensive print-based communication strategy and a comprehensive Web-based strategy. One strategy has to be the alpha and the other the beta.

Based on every study we have commissioned, read, and reviewed, it is clear that the Web will eventually be the center of gravity on most campuses. Other media like advertising, direct mail, publications, and special events will not go away, but their role will change. They will be used to support and drive traffic to the larger Web-based communication strategy.

This will not happen on all campuses and with all audiences at the same time, so great care must be taken to establish a context for creating a timeline for this transition. Some campuses are more technologically savvy and serve more technologically oriented audiences. They will lead the way. And some audiences, based on age and other factors, are more likely to jump on the Web wagon than others. But all audiences are closer than we think. After at least five years of discussion and debate, my mom, who is 83, recently went online. Her first e-mail, which she sent to me, asked this all important question, "Where's the apostrophe key?" And, when I showed her the Web site for the college she graduated from more than 60 years ago, she was intrigued.

customized, and more community-building. What they fail to do, however, is to develop the direct marketing strategy that will direct traffic to the site.

Direct marketing professionals know that it does little good to simply say, "Please visit our site." While we do in fact want students and other audiences to visit, we need to look at it from their perspective. They are being asked, encouraged, cajoled, and bribed to visit hundreds of college Web sites. Of course, this begs the question: Why should they visit yours?

There seems to be the feeling that if we just slap our Web address on everything, we have done our job of driving traffic to our Web site. Web guru Vince Bank disagrees. Writing "Dear Ad Geniuses: Give Us a Reason to Visit Your Site" in the January 2001 issue of *Revolution*, he says, "If you don't give me a reason to visit your site, I won't. Period."

He suggests that instead of simply mentioning your address (and hoping the magical Web fairies will steer traffic to your site [his words]), that you should pop your URL in the middle of this basic formula:³

"Visit our Web site at www.yourcollege.edu and receive/learn/get _____."

Using this formula, we now have:

"Visit our Web site at www.XXYZZ.edu to download

a free planning guide on how to get into the college of your choice."

or

"Visit our Web site at www.XXYZZ.edu and receive a 25 percent off coupon to use in our bookstore when you visit."

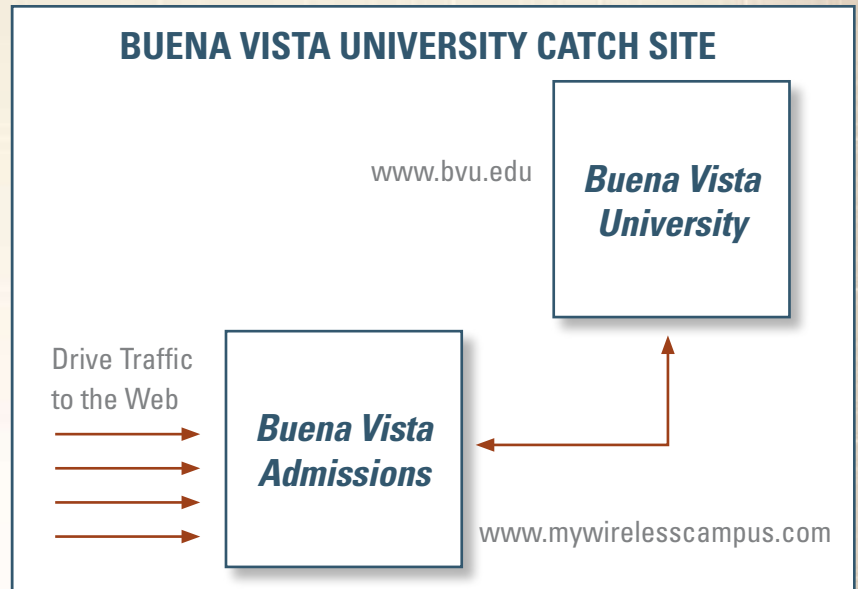
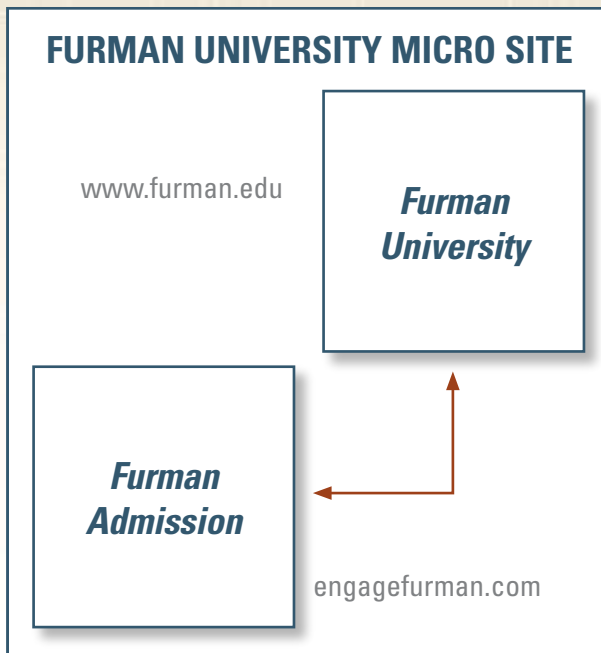
Having a great site is only half the equation. To complete the formula, you must drive traffic to your site so that students and other audiences recognize it as a preferred site for them to visit and visit again.

6. FOR BIG RESULTS, THINK SMALL

Most often, when we talk about Web strategies and sites we are talking about the larger institutional Web sites. With these kinds of stakes, it is no surprise that any discussion of Web strategy, or any Web project, can get bogged down in discussion, debate, and the delays of academe. For this reason, a significant change in your Web strategy can take months...even years.

Recently, research from a number of sources suggests that prospective students, particularly traditional-age prospective students, can be intimidated or overwhelmed by a larger institutional Web site. In fact, there are a number of studies that suggest students are actually turned off by large complicated Web pages. From their perspective, rather than wading through layer after layer looking for the one thing they are seeking, it is just easier to move on to the next college's Web site.

³URL stands for universal resource locator, or address. For example, Amazon's URL is <http://www.amazon.com>.



To help remedy these twin problems—the confusion and politics of the larger institutional Web site and the psychological barrier large sites might present to prospective students—some colleges have begun using micro sites. A micro site tends to be an audience—rather than institution—specific site. For example, a college or university might have one site set up just for recruiting. This site would have a different URL than the college site, but it would be linked to the college site. For example, I earlier mentioned the Furman site. It is a micro site. Its URL is <http://www.engagefurman.com>. Of course, it links to Furman University’s main page. The URL for that page is <http://www.furman.edu>.

A micro site has a number of very important benefits. First, it can focus exclusively on the needs of a particular audience. In Furman’s case, prospective students. A site that is dedicated to just prospective students—but is linked to the larger

Web site—means that content, architecture, and navigation will be more focused, more intuitive, and likely more engaging. Of course, you can also set up micro sites for other key audiences like alumni or donors.

Second, because it is not a component of the larger university site, it is far less political and time-consuming to change and update. In fact, many micro sites can be maintained by the admissions office. Third, because they are smaller, they are usually much less expensive to develop.

And finally, the micro site can easily carry on the graphic identity used by the college’s primary recruiting publications. If the college’s recruiting publications are a little edgy, the site can be edgy as well without upsetting the sensibilities of the larger campus community.

Micro sites can pack an enormous amount of power and can be feature

rich. They might contain chat rooms, forums, dynamic calendars, and bulletin boards. Perhaps most importantly, they can focus on enabling community between prospective students and the institution.

7. CAPTURE YOUR AUDIENCE WITH A CATCH SITE

A second cousin to the micro site is the catch site. Like the micro site, the catch site is also specific. In this case, however, it is both audience- and message-specific. For example, a college or university creates a unique catch site to help recruit students. In addition, it develops a “drive them to the Web strategy” that directs students to that specific site. And here’s the best part: Because the site has a very specific URL, only students who are responding to a specific direct marketing strategy will know to look for the site. In other words, the amount of traffic on a catch site is a

clear indicator of whether or not your direct marketing strategy is working. If the site is receiving a great number of hits, then you can be assured that the direct marketing strategy is working. If the site is receiving little traffic, then you can be assured that the direct marketing strategy has failed.

The creation of a catch site solves an important problem: Knowing what exactly drove the student to the site. If your college's main site receives a hit from a prospective student, you don't know if they are responding to a newspaper ad, the URL on the back of the viewbook, or the billboard on Interstate 80. Because the catch site URL changes with each campaign, you know immediately if it is working. This helps you to continually refine your direct marketing strategies. If you would like to take a look, our last White Paper, *Growing Pains*, contained a sidebar on a catch site we created for Buena Vista University.⁴

Like micro sites, catch sites are relatively inexpensive, generally more quick to develop and launch, and less political than a comprehensive institution-wide site. However, remember that what you save in developing the site you might well spend on the direct marketing campaign that drives students to the site.

8. DON'T GET DISTRACTED BY THE TECHNOLOGY

A couple of years ago I read a great article on why Web strategies failed.

It listed 10 reasons. The comments seemed to center around the following statement: Many Web strategies fail because they spend too much time trying to be cutting edge. They spent too much time courting technology that is too expensive, too complex, and too often unsuited for the task—or audiences—at hand. In other words, they traded being functional for being cool.

It may sound great to have the latest, coolest, fastest, but if you can't maintain it, then what's the point? In addition, you need to remember that while T-1 lines are common on campus, they are rare among your prospective students. Gizmos that zoom along the campus intranet often fall victim to the narrow bandwidth and lower-end technology that is found in the homes of our most important target audiences. Furthermore, complex graphics and interfaces that load quickly on the campus network can paralyze home machines.

9. IT IS ALL ABOUT DATA

A great Web strategy is more than eye candy. It facilitates community with prospective students and others. Part of this facilitation depends on the site's ability to gather data on each person that accesses the site so future communications can be customized, not merely personalized.

Anyone can create a site that, once the log-in is completed, remembers my first name. It is a bit tougher, but so much more effective, to gather

data so the automated response from the college is not a simple, "Dear Bob," but:

Dear Bob, We understand you are interested in journalism. Here are the names of three alumni who recently graduated with a degree in journalism from Linotype U. They would enjoy a chance to respond to whatever questions you might have. In fact, one of our alums, who happens to be an Iowan like you, will send you an introductory e-mail within the next two days.

Your site's back end must be sufficiently robust so that the appropriate data is captured. Then use the database to pre-fill the student's college application. Use the database to link prospective students or parents from one state or with a common interest in a temporary chat room. Use the database to calculate financial aid. And if you can, use the database to seamlessly integrate regular mail, broadcast e-mail, telemarketing, and even the high school visit.

Andy Beedle, CEO of abeedle.com, says, "Most colleges and universities concentrate on the front end of a Web site—the look and feel. While an effective communication strategy needs to pay careful attention to the branding and language of a Web site, there are equally real results to be gained from paying careful attention to the way your site gathers and uses data. If your site isn't data driven, then you've missed one of the Web's most important aspects."

⁴You can download a copy of that paper at www.stamats.com/whitepapers and check out the Buena Vista Web site at www.bvu.edu.

He goes on, “Students and their parents aren’t stupid. When a Web site does no more than greet them by name, without taking advantage of all the other things you’ve learned, then they know you’re faking it. A truly responsive (and not just personalized) Web site is a two-way communications tool that builds real relationships, not just ‘your name here’ responses.”

Don’t just personalize, customize. And to customize, you need to gather data.

10. WHAT GETS MONITORED IS WHAT GETS IMPROVED

Many sites collect data on traffic, but few colleges and universities really use that data to guide the development and evolution of their Web strategy. Let me give you two quick suggestions. First, use the data to determine which pages on your site are most popular and when and with whom. Pages with the most traffic should receive the most attention. Pages with the least traffic should be evaluated or even removed.

Second, organize the data by quarter. This might reveal that prospective students have different needs and visit different pages at different times in the recruiting funnel. When they are juniors, they want the big picture and information on majors. When they are seniors, they are looking for more detailed information and perhaps information on financial aid.

Use Web traffic data to make your site even more friendly.

CONCLUSION

Thinking of your Web as one element in a comprehensive integrated marketing strategy helps provide an all-important context. Settling on a clear goal for your Web strategy offers critical direction. Defining your one or two most important audiences gives you essential focus. Establishing how you will evaluate your Web site’s effectiveness helps you invest critical

time and treasure with a measure of certainty. While this White Paper explores 10 basic ideas for making your Web more effective, all of them flow from critical decisions on context, direction, focus, and investment. Clarify these four and your Web strategy will immediately be more effective, and it will be an investment that pays long-term dividends for your institution.

10 ways to improve your Web strategy

Interested in 10 quick ideas to make your Web strategy more effective? Here are a handful offered by Eric Sickler (I introduced him earlier) and Eric Hodgson, another colleague from Stamats:

1. *Make your URL as simple, obvious, and memorable as possible. Even if you are Southeast Northern Western University, you can be Southeast.edu or even Southeast.com. If students can’t remember your URL you will suffer.*
2. *Design well. Illustrate profusely. Write less. And the corollary: Think bullets and factoids, not copy blocks.*
3. *If it’s in your publications, don’t put it on your Web site. Audiences quickly tire of duplicate information and photographs.*
4. *One of the most important college-choice variables is the list of majors. Make it obvious.*
5. *When reviewing your own site, use a dial-up connection rather than your high-speed campus network. If your Web site loads fast on dial-up, it will load fast in the homes of your students. And test it on a variety of platforms.*
6. *The initial “signup” and ongoing contacts should gather enough information from prospective students so you can begin to*

customize responses that might involve postal mail, e-mail, even telephone calls.

7. *Make sure you have a simple online application that is at least PDF-based. Database-driven is even better.*
8. *Use the Web to facilitate contact with real people. Make it easy for prospective students to e-mail faculty, other students, even other prospective students. Directories should be obvious and open. Remember, the goal is community.*
9. *Have a group campus tour/overview of your site. Your tour should load fast, be interactive, and give a great sense of how the campus “feels.” Students especially want to know what their first year will be like.*
10. *Finally, put your phone number and address on your Web site. Some students might actually want to give you a call or drop you a line!*

Some Web sites worth checking out

If you are interested in some great sites, built on solid strategy, check out the following:

- <http://www.engagefurman.com>
- <http://www.kcai.edu>
- <http://www.bluffton.edu>
- <http://www.mnu.edu>



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