



**SOCIAL MEDIA OPPORTUNITIES
FOR COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES**

The Untapped Power of the New Media Era

You are involved with running or leading a college or university. Your organization has a website. It gets some traffic. You spend enormous sums on traditional marketing. You do everything every other school does with which you compete for the best students, the best faculty, and the fastest-growing endowment. But you are frustrated by at least several seemingly intractable problems:

1. How to clearly differentiate your school from all others;
2. How to reach more would-be student applicants of better quality;
3. How to showcase your institution's academic talent.
4. How to really give outsiders a true sense of the rich and textured academic and social life uniquely offered by your institution.

Websites and traditional brochures and press releases, pay-per-click ads and such present a glossy, one-way, and very static picture of your institution. While most potential student candidates will visit your website, they won't stay long and they won't come back often. Why? Because the site doesn't change very much. Traditional websites do not easily foster the development of fresh content. And, there's no conversation going on.

Conversation? Yes, because today's online generation has little interest in a highly-polished institutional website broadcast sanctioned after much review by lawyers and public relations people. They prefer interactivity, fresh and timely content, a chance to hear from their peers whom they trust most (even when they don't know the people in the peer group personally). Would be students seeking answers online are looking for online communities where they can dialogue... ask questions, leave comments, read and respond to online impressions offered by peers and others.

If you are like most people who run or lead a college or university you're frustrated over the fact that so much of a positive nature occurs at your school that few people outside the inner, on-campus academic community ever learn about. Much is going on. Great teaching moments and remarkable learning events are happening, and yet you have no platform from which to spread the news. You spend a great deal of time and energy trying to interest the traditional media, but unless something goes horribly wrong at your school, the mainstream media at best shows a great deal of indifference to your ongoing communications.

You routinely post your news on your web site, too. But the media doesn't read it. In fact, if you're honest about it, have you ever actually read your web site... the entire web site? Do you go there often? Don't count trips you make to access the online website directory of departmental phone numbers. No one is going to apply to your school because you have a phone directory on your website. Now if you don't read the web site and you don't go there very often for much of anything that either informs you or differentiates your school and site from all others, why would any one else have a different reaction.

It's Time to Consider an Online Community

By definition, an online community is online, of course, and it is a place freely accessible via the Internet where people literally anywhere in the world any time of day or night can visit to share news and information, give opinions, ask questions, offer answers, and otherwise join in the available commentary. Like a real life community, the conversation evolves; there are new things to talk about every day. Unlike a real community, participants can be anonymous or not.

Since the online community is a living thing, so to speak, with new and evolving conversational threads being provided by visitors as well as representatives from your own institution, there's a reason for outsiders to come back often. It is the antithesis of a static website. And because over time in an online community much is discussed across a wide variety of topics, the depth of content available to your online community is significantly richer and deeper than anything attainable by, or available on, the traditional website.

Today, online seekers of the ideal school may search on the name of your college or university. They do this, for example, if your school is known to them by reputation. This is a very important distinction. If they've heard about you and have a favorable impression of your school, they'll find you. Your website isn't finding them.

Would be applicants and their parents are just as apt, however, to search on terms that have nothing to do with a university's name. They search college themes and conditions in which they care about most: dorm life, scholastic achievement, academic standing, campus facilities, sports offerings... If these key words have not been optimized on your web site, these online seekers will not find you. Or, if they do, and all they are treated to is the standard website presentation, they quickly move on to locate a more credible source of authentic information, usually from an affinity group. An online property, in contrast – and especially one that is embedded in your traditional website – is awash in key words and very specific to your institution. An online property embedded in your traditional website will bring more visitors to your website than almost anything else you can do to optimize search results. That's because the content on the online community is always fresh. This is favored by the search engine formulas. And your community will over time build an enormous archive of relevant information of interest to anyone looking for what you have to offer. More importantly, perhaps, is that people who discover your static website are less inclined to leave in a hurry if you are offering an online community within that website. The inverse is also true: people visiting your online community are more inclined to visit your static website to get more specific information about your institution if they liked what they heard and saw in your online community.

What Exactly is an Online Community?

If you found this whitepaper, you've already visited an online community: ours. In our case, it is a place online where my associate Dave Cote and I post or 'publish' brief presentations pretty regularly of our views relevant to marketing, public relations, advertising and social media news of interest to us and the visitors we get from all over the world each day. Many of these visitors ultimately subscribe to our site so they are notified whenever we have something new to say or report. Many leave comments, ask questions, and otherwise help us shape the ongoing conversation.

Many people would refer to our site as a blog, which is short for weblog in case you want to look it up and understand its technical origins. In fact, our site is a hybrid blog and website... it offers daily commentary as well as static pages of standard information and offerings like this whitepaper.

How Would This Work for You

If you're new to this topic, you will likely be overwhelmed by some of the information that comes next: not because it is technical. It isn't. But because the simplicity and the power of the new online social media opportunity is astonishing. Our site, for example, is built using a totally

free OpenSource software product which is maintained and upgraded for free by a global team of volunteer developers. Other than the time we took to pick a template we like from among hundreds freely offered and then established which traditional blog components we favored over others, it cost us nothing to create this site and put it online. It costs nothing to create the content except our time to decide what we want to write about and the few minutes it takes to actually compose our thoughts and publish them instantaneously. Our site is online and available 24x7 worldwide. Other than the few dollars spent to acquire a domain name, we now publish globally every day over a free Internet at zero expense – and our ‘publication,’ so to speak, can be as many pages long as we wish with no implications to cost.

The longer we keep it and the more we post (and assuming we have something to write about that people want to read and talk about) the larger, more varied, and more powerful becomes the archived features. Months from now new visitors will find us after searching on a keyword in the headline of a post we may have written last year.

Online communities built from free OpenSource software and other popular so-called blogging software platforms can be developed with no requirement for programming; no IT investment; virtually little or no training for anyone who has every used a laptop computer. Our site features the two of us as the chief voices. But you can have as many or as few as you wish. An online community site you might create could offer publishing status (it’s called ‘authority’) to selected faculty members, special students, administrative staff, alumni and others, or it can be the platform for the exclusive use of the University President’s Office.

A Disaster Awaits You if Your Can’t Let Go

Some things some people may want to tell you if they had the chance – and they would have the chance if you operated a proper blog – could be hard to hear. If you can’t accept the fact that your academic institution would be sponsoring a site at which detractors could freely state opinions contrary to yours or in opposition of the administrative party line... don’t experiment with this new technology. An online property, whether a blog or any of a number of other forms available, that shuts off comments and merely continues the same old website promotional campaign will not only do you no good, but it may damage your reputation.

Don’t Start if You Can’t Sustain It

If you are at all familiar with blogs, corporate, academic, personal or otherwise, you know the Internet is littered with abandoned properties. Blogs started with enthusiasm often end up undernourished and finally nothing more than digital skeletons when people realize the discipline required to sustain the online property can be significant. Shouldering the whole responsibility for populating the blog at least every other day with something interesting – especially while you’ve got a full time administrative, faculty or executive management job – is almost impossible. This is why we’re recommending these days that academic institutions draw upon their unique and massive resources of writers and thinkers to create a blog team with a shared responsibility for walking the blog.

Even if You Defer This, Others May Not

Nothing prevents a disgruntled student, as one example, from starting his or her own online blog property – and nothing is potentially more dangerous. In my experience it happens most often when someone feels they haven’t had a voice, their target has not been receptive to contrary points of view. Sometimes it happens because some people simply want to behave badly or they aren’t balanced in some way. In any event, by the time this happens to you, if it does, it may be

too late to counter with your own open online community forum. You'll be in a defensive posture from the start. You'll appear reactive.

In contrast, a university-sanctioned blog with some history offers a place for people to vent a bit before blowing it. Your blog is an early warning system of brewing trouble. It's a place where, if a full-blown controversy breaks out on campus, you have a platform from which to at least present your position. God forbid a crisis occur on campus... a strike, a shooting, a horrible weather event... having a working blog gives you access to your own, immediate news bulletin service via the blog to which you can author updates and alerts from anywhere in the world you happen to be (that happens to offer Internet service, of course).

Ask People You Know and Trust About This Opportunity

Chances are if you are with a college or university of any size whatsoever, bloggers currently exists among your faculty. With almost equal certainty, you're sure to find bloggers among your students. Faculty members are using blogs to enrich their global academic reach and discourse. Some are using it as a teaching tool. Students... well... they have as many reasons for doing this as there are varieties of students. If you can't find these people on campus, find them online [Go to Google, click on More, click on Blogs, click on Advanced Search, and try a variety of keywords such as the name of your school... you'll be surprised.] Read what they are writing. Lurk a while. Try leaving a comment. Eventually you may get comfortable enough to ask them why they blog, whether they think an institutional blog would or would not work and why.

Examples Abound on our Blog

Dave Cote and I routinely write about college and university blogs we find. Scanning our blogsite will bring you to these posts and the embedded links from which you can travel to these sites to see for yourself. You'll not only see how they work and why, but you'll be entertained to a vast variety of layouts, designs and methods used. Essentially however, everything really boils down to whether or not you (meaning the collective you) have anything to say, whether you can say it plainly, and whether you can take pushback. In short, content is king when it comes to blogging, followed by authenticity, transparency, credibility, and patience.

Unless you're a well-known rock star or a presidential candidate, for example, you will blog in obscurity for some period of time. It takes time for people to find you. This is the stage of highest blog mortality. But if you press on, get help from a great team of voices, listen to what others have to say, you'll be richly rewarded with an online site that at long last does differentiate your institution... does give it a face and a voice... does convey the rich diversity of your many offerings.

A Brief Word About How We Might Help

Academic professionals are welcome to call or email Dave and me at any time with any question. We take emails and calls, and provide reasonable answers all the time for free.

Below are some of the other things we do. There are no specific cost figures here because these whitepapers of ours are read avidly by a lot of traditional PR firms and website developers who think we have horns on our head. But either Dave or I are happy to quote you a number if you call or write. In general, is you have traditional website development costs in mind, divide those

numbers by at least ten. Online properties are an order of magnitude cheaper to build. If you have traditional PR firm monthly retainer figures in mind, divide those by at least three or four as it relates to our ongoing monthly services outlined below.

For short money, as in really short, one or the both of us will come to wherever you are for a day, talk to any size group, give a laptop projector-enhanced presentation showing a wide variety of college blogs and explain how they work. Clever people who listen well to our presentation can have a working blog the next day. You'd never need to see us ever again.

For those who like our company, and like our Company, we build blog prototypes for you that are customized to your institution and your objective and your targeted audience. It takes us about a week once we know your objectives. If you hate it, our effort has cost you nothing. If you love it and want to buy it outright and have us go away, that's fine, too. Our prototype gets redirected to your host and it is ready to go when you are.

For some others who like us so much they never want to see us leave, we offer monthly blog maintenance and management services and social media consulting. This means we keep the technology current, and we provide gentle advice about why some of your posts get traction among visitors and why others don't. We assist in the development of editorial calendars and themes and a bunch of other ongoing things that busy people in academia can't always wedge into their already busy schedule. We train anyone and everyone you want how to author a blog post and publish it. We provide our expertise when it comes to copyright, trademark, and privacy and overall best practices.