A Study to Examine the Role of Print, Web, and Social Media for Recruiting Students

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Abstract
Recruiting for higher education is a well-documented and practiced process; however, new social media venues of delivering information are changing the way some universities are reaching prospective students. Recruiting students for higher education has typically been accomplished by a variety of traditional methods, including print, Web, and campus visits. While these methods continue to be used, the existence of new social media including Twitter, Facebook, blogging, and message boards has pushed many universities towards recruiting in new ways. As we think about recruiting students into our programs, we are faced with many more choices than we have had in the past. We are also faced with students who are much more media savvy than previous students. There seems to be very little in the literature about the impact and usefulness of the newer social media outlets. This study was designed to determine how effectively students perceive different recruiting methods (print, Web, and social media) as well as who helped them sort through all of the information to make their choices. First semester freshmen in the College of Technology (CoT) at Purdue University were surveyed to determine how print, Web, and social media for recruiting are perceived by prospective students. They were asked what people influenced them during their college search and which forms of media influenced their decision-making process. This paper will present results of a Web survey conducted during fall 2010.

Introduction
Colleges spend a lot of time and money on recruiting, in an effort to attract the best students to their programs. In today’s market, the challenge is even greater. For many years, marketing typically focused on printed materials and on-campus activities. Although these venues are still valid, the Web has expanded the ease and scope of promoting colleges online. Much of the printed material has been duplicated or expanded to the Web. Another resource has been added with the onset of social media. Social media can be defined as “a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).” Facebook and Twitter are two of the most prevalent social media outlets.

Social media presents another opportunity for recruiting. The College of Technology at Purdue has recently started to explore the use of social media as a resource. In order to better
understand how students were accessing recruiting information about the college, a study was designed to poll the incoming freshmen about what materials they used most in making their decision to enroll in Purdue’s College of Technology. The objective of the study was to determine the most successful venues for recruiting students and the prevalence of social media usage among the freshmen.

Current Recruiting Methods

Face-to-face

The College of Technology employed a variety of recruiting methods to recruit students into the fall 2010 class. The University has an expansive schedule of recruiting days for high school students who have not yet applied and other days for those who have already been admitted. The College of Technology participates in these face-to-face opportunities with a presentation about the college and tours of the college facilities.

In addition to the campus visits, College of Technology student services representatives visit a large number of Indiana high school Project Lead the Way classes. The representatives promote the college programs, network with the teachers, and discuss the need for high school mathematics and science.

Admitted female, underrepresented, and high achieving students received at least one phone call from a current student. The purpose of the phone calls was to make contact, inform, answer questions, and encourage the prospective student to commit for the fall.

Print

The college has a variety of print publications; however, the major print recruiting piece is the College of Technology magazine. This annual publication is targeted towards high school students and their parents. It includes information about all of the technology programs as well as information about scholarships, student organizations, and vignettes of current students. Programs are grouped into four major areas rather than by individual majors: 1) computing, 2) engineering technology, 3) technology management, and 4) professional programs. In this manner, a student who was interested in computing would see all of the programs related to computing, a student who was interested in engineering technology would find all of those programs in the same place.

Web

The College of Technology has had a Web site for a long time. For this recruiting class, the Web was organized similar to the print magazine. All of the programs were grouped into the same four areas that were used in the print magazine. Included on the Web site, with each of the four
program areas, was a video which explained more about the different majors and opportunities for students and graduates.

**Social Media**

While recruiting for the fall 2010 class, the college did have a Facebook page and a Twitter presence; however, the college did not have an in-depth strategy for embedding these into the recruiting process.

**Methodology**

A survey was devised to determine what recruiting materials were typically used by prospective students that selected the College of Technology at Purdue University. The intention was to gather their preferences and thoughts as to their choice of recruiting material formats. It was hoped that a comparison could be made of the effectiveness of each medium in order to impact future marketing strategies. Two of the questions the study hoped to answer were: 1) How did students choose Purdue’s College of Technology; and 2) What aspects of the various recruiting media attracted them to the College of Technology?

**The Survey**

The survey was developed through Qualtrics, an online survey development package. The survey used a combination of multiple-choice questions, a Likert Scale format, and open-ended questions. The survey took approximately ten minutes to complete and was e-mailed directly to the first year students in the college.

When designing a survey, the researcher needs to avoid leading questions, present questions in a balanced manner, and not create questions with an argument or counterargument already within the question (Scheaffer, et al., 2011). The initial survey was developed by Computer Graphics Technology graduate student, Brandon Karcher, as part of his thesis. Initially, a pilot survey was created and tested to identify any misleading questions or omissions. It was tested on a sample group as part of a technology class in fall 2010. The pilot resulted in minor changes related to format. Some of the questions were changed from open-ended to a list of possible choices including “other” to allow for additional comments. This change was made in order to ensure that the students would better understand what information was being sought.

The survey was modeled on the Theory of Planned Behavior that was proposed and developed by Icek Ajzen in his paper, *From Intentions to Actions: A Theory of Planned Behavior* (1985). According to the theory, decisions are guided by three considerations: behavioral, control, and normative beliefs. When these three beliefs combine, an intention is formed. The intention is then linked to a behavior, and depending on the perceived behavioral control an individual has, the
behavior will be carried out. According to the theory, in order to make a decision, a person takes into consideration his/her perceived beliefs and attitudes, then develops an intention, and finally a behavior follows. To follow this model, questions are asked in a manner that allows for questions based on attitudes/beliefs, intentions to use various media, and finally questions regarding behaviors (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010).

To utilize the Theory of Planned Behavior, the survey posed questions in a manner that flowed chronologically, as well as in the same order of the theory. First, questions were asked about the students’ experiences while enrolling in the College of Technology. Questions such as “Who or what influenced you the most in making the decision to attend the College of Technology (CoT)?” were used to gather information regarding the student beliefs and/or attitudes regarding different factors about parents, advisers, and mediums such as print or Web. Next, according to the theory, the intention or readiness to perform a behavior needed to be assessed (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010). The survey covered multiple areas related to intention. Measuring students’ willingness to consider social media, and their intention to later use it as an information source, compares to the intention step in the Theory of Planned Behavior. Finally, the behavior section focused on how the students used, are currently using, and how they think the College of Technology could use media to recruit students. (Karcher, 2011)

**Sample Population**

The population chosen for the study was the freshman class that entered the College of Technology at Purdue University in fall 2010. Only first-year students (freshmen) were included; students who had transferred into the program from another major or another university were not included in the study. The first-year student group was chosen because these students had most recently used the College of Technology recruiting materials during their search for a college to attend.

The fall 2010 freshman class of the College of Technology consisted of 563 students – 83.6 percent were male and 16.4 percent were female. Participation in the survey was voluntary, and the subjects were not identifiable to the researchers. The survey was e-mailed directly to the students and results were recorded through Qualtrics. Of the 563 subjects that received the survey, 57 responded for a total of approximately 10 percent. Of the respondents, 81 percent were male and 19 percent female. During fall 2010, there were 3,450 students in the College of Technology of which 86.3 percent were male and 13.7 percent were female (Purdue Data Digest, 2011). The percentage of females who responded is slightly higher than the percentage of females in the freshman class or in the college as a whole; however, the participants were relatively representative of the entire College of Technology undergraduate student body. Most of the respondents were residents of Indiana, 65 percent, with only 35 percent out-of-state respondents.
Results of the Study

The purpose of this study was to gain insights into the question—“What role does print, Web, and social media play in recruiting for higher education?” The survey supplied information related to: 1) what attitudes students have regarding the different types of media used for recruiting; 2) which methods students used in searching for a potential university, and what were their experiences with those mediums; and 3) what other factors affected the recruitment process for potential students.

The first set of questions, relating to attitudes and beliefs, was introduced as follows—*Think back to when you were trying to select a college and answer the following questions.* Table 1 shows how the prospective student first found out about the College of Technology. Where did they start their Purdue search? Did they know about the College of Technology prior to starting their search? As indicated by the results, 37 percent of the prospective students started their search at the Purdue Web site. None of the students indicated that they started at the College of Technology Web site. This might suggest that the college could do a better job marketing to prospective students and their parents.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Media Type</th>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Purdue Web site</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>37.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School Adviser</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>15.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>15.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends &amp; Relatives</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CoT Promotional Material</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CoT Event</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CoT Facebook</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CoT Twitter</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CoT Web site</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. How did you first hear about the College of Technology?

Table 2 shows the primary information sources prospective students used after they became aware of the College of Technology Web site. The College of Technology Web site is indicated in the top three choices for 56 percent of the students. This reinforces the value of the information provided on the College of Technology Web site.
Table 2. When you were researching the College of Technology, what were your primary information sources? Choose top 3.

The last question in this set asks the prospective student to indicate what most influenced them to enroll in the College of Technology. Table 3 shows the most important factors that influenced their decision.

Table 3. Who or what influenced you the most in making the decision to attend the College of Technology? Choose top 3.

Note that throughout the first set of questions, Facebook was only indicated once and Twitter not at all. None of the prospective students indicated that they searched in these areas.

The second set of questions (loosely related to intentions) was introduced as follows—*Indicate your Internet usage and habits when you were a high school student.* This portion of the survey determined the typical Internet and social media usage of students while in high school. Figure 1 shows the amount of time high school students spent daily at various online tasks.
The two most prominent uses were for homework and socializing, with students typically spending one to two hours a night on these activities.

Figure 2 shows the number of times the prospective student accessed the College of Technology Web site when searching for information. Most of the respondents indicated that they accessed the Web site two to five times in the course of their search. An additional question asked—Did your parent(s) or guardian(s) assist you in your search for a college?—To which 77 percent responded “yes.” When asked to indicate all of the methods they used to search, the replies indicated that it was predominantly the Internet (82%), followed by campus visits (72%), and printed materials (67%).

Figure 3 shows what social media responders were using at the time of their college search. Facebook was the overwhelming response with Twitter a distant second. In addition, they were...
asked if they used social media in their college search. The majority, 58 percent, indicated that they did not use social media in their college search. Of the remaining respondents that did use social media in their search, 18 percent found it very useful, 50 percent found it moderately useful, and 32 percent found it somewhat useful. When asked if they found useful information through a social network, 84 percent responded that they used Facebook, with only 11 percent using Twitter.

Respondents were also asked if they knew that the College of Technology had a Facebook and Twitter presence and if so how did they find it. In response, 48 percent answered that they were aware of the College of Technology Facebook and Twitter accounts. When asked how they learned about Facebook and Twitter, the responses were varied and included random searches, from a friend, and the College of Technology Web site.

The last set of questions (related to behaviors) was introduced as follows—The following questions will have you evaluate the recruiting material. First, the prospective students were asked to evaluate the media used by the College of Technology and how it compared to other colleges they were researching. Second, they were asked which mediums were most helpful in their search. Overall, the College of Technology materials were shown to be effective in all four areas: visual appeal, informative, persuasive, and availability. The majority ranked the materials as a three or a four on the Likert scale.
Another question asked respondents to rank the usefulness of various media types used by the College of Technology. The top three choices were the College of Technology Web site, with the College of Technology promotional material and events next and relatively closely weighted. By comparison, Facebook and Twitter were the two lowest percentages.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Media Type</th>
<th>Not Beneficial</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>Extremely Beneficial</th>
<th>Percent &gt; 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CoT Event</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CoT Facebook</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CoT Promotional Material</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CoT Twitter</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CoT Web site</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. Of the following College of Technology information sources, which ones did you find the most beneficial?

The final question asked what medium they think the College of Technology should use in the future for recruiting purposes. Table 5 shows the results. Facebook was ranked the highest at 29 percent. However, College of Technology events and the Web site followed closely with 24 percent each. College of Technology printed promotional materials came in at 16 percent, with Twitter receiving only 4 percent. It is interesting to note that these students who ranked Facebook slightly higher than events or promotional (print) materials, did not consider Facebook an important aspect of their search process which they had undertaken only months earlier.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer</th>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CoT Event</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CoT Facebook</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CoT Promotional Material (print)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CoT Twitter</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CoT Web site</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5. How do you think the College of Technology should connect with current high school students?
Conclusions

The study was designed to look at three questions. The respondents to this survey were first-year freshmen in the College of Technology during fall 2010. A summation of their responses follows.

What attitudes students have regarding the different types of media used for recruiting:

- During high school, most students used the Internet mostly for homework and socializing.
- Most of the students were active on Facebook; however, they did not use the Purdue Facebook page during their search.
- Facebook was recommended as the medium to use to connect with future students.
- College of Technology events and the College of Technology Web site were also recommended for connecting with future students.

What methods did students use in searching for a potential university?

- Most of these students first connected with the college through the Purdue University Web site.
- During their search, the College of Technology Web site was considered an important source for information followed by College of Technology events and College of Technology promotional materials.

What other factors affected the recruitment process for potential students?

- Parents had the strongest influence on helping students make their final college decision.
- The Purdue and College of Technology Web sites were also strong influencers.

Although a small sample, this study gave some insights into how students searched for a college, who/what influenced them during their search, and their perceptions of what media they think the college should use in future recruiting. A follow-up survey with fall 2011 freshmen will give additional data and insight into these issues.

References


