

I'll Bet You Made That Yourself: College and university websites aren't meeting user needs or acting as effective marketing tools.

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IT IS WIDELY RECOGNIZED that a college website should accomplish two major tasks-provide customer service for the needs of users and market the school. Unfortunately, a random survey I recently completed of 50 not-for-profit and for-profit college and university websites shows that most of the sites accomplish neither task and don't serve the potential student or college well at all. Discussions with students while consulting on customer service issues revealed website opinions ranging from "Okay, I guess" to "Looks like #% *." "Okay" is not good enough and, well, the other end of the range needs no comment.



So what specifically is wrong with the sites? First, they are often hard to navigate (some were even close to impossible). Second, they are written too often in academic jargon for the wrong audience. And third, they look like the college had a contest and chose the most amateurish design to use.

Perhaps that sounds harsh, but prospective students are deciding to skip schools because of their reaction to the website more often than the admissions departments would ever want to know.

NAVIGATING IN TROUBLED WATERS

Out of the 50 sites reviewed, all but two were difficult to navigate. Website navigation should be intuitive for the viewer if schools are to provide the service levels that will keep the viewer engaged at the site. Thirty-eight of the sites were organized in a counterintuitive manner, forcing viewers to sail from one page to another and often yet

another to find information, if they could find it at all. This is not to say that the information is not somewhere on the site. It is just buried, sending viewers on a treasure hunt.

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Serious flaws rendered 28 sites un navigable or quite difficult to navigate. And 18 sites contained broken links. Six actually would allow you to get to a page you sought but then would not allow you to leave the page. Four others had no link to allow a viewer to return to the home page after reading other pages. Hitting the back button many times was necessary to get back home.

What message does a website with such basic flaws send to the viewer who may be thinking about applying? Not a good one-especially if the person is a potential computer science, design, or marketing major. It is embarrassing and disheartening to see such basic flaws in a college website that could be easily checked and fixed with a simple program such as EcollegeWebCheck, available through Core Data Center (www.coredatacenter.com), a web design and online marketing firm serving higher ed and other industries.

MAJOR MAJOR MAJOR FLAWS

An even larger problem was the lack of readily available information on the sites. Only six of the 50 sites reviewed made information important to students and parents available. Of course, some of this may well go back to the navigation issues. It is there somewhere, but where?

One common problem reminded me of Where's Waldo?, with the institution's president playing the part of Waldo. Twenty-seven sites made it next to impossible to get in touch with the president of the college. Thirteen of the sites may have been developed by the isolated Major Major Major Major from Joseph Heller's Catch-22. It was as if the president was off limits to students and parents or was hiding from people. There was simply no way to find the president at all on these sites.

The president, for better or worse, is the emblem of the institution to the public, which believes he or she actually has power to make changes or get answers for them. If it's difficult to contact the president, that presents a negative symbol of customer service for the college. It will lose students.

On most of the websites, the president or president's office was listed on the directory, but the listing was not an active link. That is, clicking on it yielded nothing. (Though I have heard about some presidents who don't get much done, it is still not wise to advertise that fact-even if it is emblematic of how the campus community thinks that nothing is happening.) Leaving the president off the site sends a message that this college's leader does not want to hear from you.

Similarly, if faculty or administrators cannot be easily located, the message is "We don't want to hear from you." On 44 of the websites, it was possible to get to a department or an office, but getting the name of an individual in the office or the address of the office was difficult or impossible. On 22 sites, I could often get to mid and lower-level managers or staffers but not the top people. Or I could merely get a telephone number, often simply a campus extension number or a local one without area code. Phone number publication issues aside, these are websites, electronic technology, so it should logically follow that I would be able to contact persons through the web by using e-mail.

But even if I were trying to locate information for snail mail, on 14 of the websites I would have been frustrated. The actual addresses of the colleges and college offices were almost all hidden deep in the web. I had to dig into Admissions, Contact Us, site maps, subdirectories, or online catalogues, which are absolutely impossible to use on the web without fuller intuitive indexes or search capabilities.

ACADEMIC-ESE ISN'T EASY

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One of the worst sections I found on college websites was the catalogue. Somehow the common thinking is to just scan the catalogue and plunk the entire thing in a website, thinking that it will be helpful. It isn't. Even the hard copy versions of most catalogues are extremely difficult for the nonacademic to use, so why would they be any better on a website?

Also, college catalogues are generally boring and written for an internal audience. That becomes clear when one looks at all the argot, academic slang, and technical words that fill the pages. Too often, the catalogues are written as if the creators used a thesaurus of academic-ese-the pedantic language we use to keep nonacademics away and prove our membership in the academy.

If language is the coin of the realm in academia, we spend it much too freely, but we are very parsimonious with clarity, particularly in catalogues. Moreover, the web is a visual, graphic medium. If a college does wish to publish its catalogue online, it should at least provide a complete and intuitive index rather than large chunks of categories such as academics, student affairs, and the like. Actively linked categories such as "business studies" should be provided. Even better would be to break business studies into its subcategories so students can find them easily. Still better would be to place a Search the Catalogue feature on the web so students could find what they wanted easily (if the search feature worked well, that is).

IF IT LOOKS HOMEMADE ...

If someone can tell you made something yourself, what they are really saying is that it looks homemade, that is, not professional. Most every website I studied fell into that

category. They all looked as if they were either put together by a committee that could not choose a consistent design, font, or sometimes page layout, or they were given to the techies to create. Neither is the way to create a website. Techies are great at technical stuff, but they are not marketing people, and marketing is what the web is for-to present a great image of the college.

Websites should be designed and completed by people who know marketing and the customers they are trying to reach. This is not what colleges do well. Even though they may have renowned marketing studies and research going on around campus, they do not seem to be able to get beyond the distaste of college as a business to market it properly on the web.

In fact, I would suggest that what applies here is one of my "Principles of Good Academic Customer Service"-about the fact that there's more than one solution to every problem and solutions may be found externally rather than in academia. It may well be a good idea to engage an external web designer who has experience with marketing to and for academia.

Start with having your website evaluated and checked for navigation, links, setup, and design with a free or low-cost service such as www.collegewebeval.com from Core Academics. Then, if need be, get the website turned from a customer disservice into an enrollment and retention winner.

Neal Raisman is president of AcademicMAPS, a consultancy specializing in customer service and retention in higher education. His book is Embrace the Oxymoron: Customer Service in Higher Education (LRP Publishers, 2002). His new book The Power of Retention: The Effect of Customer Service in Higher Education will be published by The Administrator's Bookshelf in 2008. His blog www.academicmaps.blogspot.com is viewed by over2000 colleagues a week.