

# **Curb Appeal: Designing Web Sites for Prospective Students**

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## **Curb Appeal: Designing Web Sites for Prospective Students**

By Michael Stoner

Identifying the most important visitors to a Web site and understanding what they are looking for is an essential first step in designing and building a great Web site — one that gives visitors what they need and gets the results that you need.

This is especially true when the target audience is prospective students. Understanding how they use a college Web site — and making sure that your site is designed for browsing and for in-depth exploration — will make your site much more appealing to them. And testing the site to make sure you are meeting their needs — not gratifying the egos of a Web designer, president, dean, vice president for marketing or a member of the board of trustees — is an essential step toward making the site effective at communicating with this demanding demographic.

Our own experience and research, and that of others, indicates that although your Web site is your most important resource for communicating with prospective students of any age, it shouldn't be the only means of communicating with them. Traditional-age students still value other types of communication, including (especially) print. The majority of members of the class of 2007 said they would rather look at a Web site than read brochures sent in the mail (57 percent), but a significant percentage (43 percent) said they would rather read brochures than look at a Web site.<sup>1</sup> So though your site should serve as the centerpiece of your marketing, it's intended to be supported by other types of communications.

### **Designing a Site for Prospective Student Visitors**

People visit Web sites with specific objectives in mind: to learn something or to do something that's important to them. And prospective students, of whatever age, are no different. Helping them achieve their objectives should be paramount, for once they've accomplished what they came to do, they'll consider doing something that is important to you — like requesting information, signing in, personalizing, or applying. But if you make it hard for them to find what they're looking for, they may not do anything, and (worse) they may never come back.

In designing a site that works, you need a clear understanding of what your visitors want to do when they come to your site. What's the information that is most important to them? Make sure you know what it is — and make it easy to find. This is particularly important when considering the needs of prospective students, who are a picky and demanding group.

Often, compelling content or great services trump design — on sites like MySpace, for example. MySpace pages are confusing and ugly, but this didn't stop visitors from making the site one of the most trafficked social networks. Of course, your site doesn't need to be ugly; it's not an either/or proposition. Plenty of sites are both visually stunning and make it easy for visitors to achieve their objectives. Apple.com is a great example.

Whether they're high school sophomores, juniors, or seniors, teens have notoriously limited attention spans, which is why your Web site has to be incredibly well organized and browsable by students of all ages. Students typically look for quick bites of information and want to move through your site efficiently; they don't want to wait even 15 seconds for a bloated Flash movie or an enormous interactive component to load. Research—including our own usability and concept testing—indicates that the basics are very important (and often overlooked); that too much white space and Flash (especially at high levels of the site) can be a turnoff; and that key basic information that can be quickly located is crucial to encouraging repeat visits and applications.

Remember, too, that these students are searchers. They're used to typing their search term into Google and getting the results they want. What does a great search look like? One that presents weighted results based on the behavior of previous users who searched for the same term. For one of the best examples, visit Buffalo.edu and search for "financial aid." The University at Buffalo's search engine examines all UB's Web servers and displays a comprehensive list of results, but at the top of the list are the results that most people who searched for "financial aid" actually picked.

It's also essential to understand how high school students use a college site during the different stages of the process of their college search.

**The first look.** In their college search mode, high school sophomores and juniors visit many sites, and they have a limited set of questions they want to answer. Here's what the research and marketing firm Royall & Company learned:<sup>2</sup>

[Prospective students] might use Web sites to answer these questions: "Where can I get in? What schools can I afford to attend? Will I be able to study in my area of interest?" As a result, they look for a list of majors, data on the entering class (test scores and other information), costs, and a limited set of other information. They want basic information and while they may go deep, they're more interested in getting a feel for what your institution is like and learning, in general, if it might be a good fit for them.

These students are not reading, they're scanning, looking for words that are important to them. They spend little time on a single page, or even on a single site. They are just checking to learn whether they should return for a more in-depth look later. And if they can't find what they want, or don't find it quickly, they may not come back to your site at all.

Much has been made of the larger number of applications that institutions are receiving from students they have never heard of—the so-called stealth applicants. This behavior arises from a number of factors, but one of them certainly is because the advent of the Internet has flipped control of information from organizations to consumers. This is the Google era, in which a moderately determined searcher can find a great deal of information about any subject, including a college or university.

Another factor at play is that traditional-age students have grown up receiving thousands of marketing messages every day. They're fairly adept at sorting through these messages, determining what is authentic and what isn't, and paying attention only to messages that have some resonance for them. And they are able to turn off messages they don't want to receive. When they want

something from you, they'll let you know — but only when they are ready to develop a relationship with you. So they'll learn as much as they need to know about your institution to determine whether they want to apply, and they may, or may not, let you know of their interest before you receive their application.

This pragmatism is, in my view, one of the most fascinating characteristics of how teens use college and university Web sites. Here's what they told the enrollment management consulting firm Noel-Levitz that they want to do on a college Web site:<sup>3</sup>

Activity	Have done it	Would if they could
Submitted a form online to receive more info by mail or e-mail	81%	48%
Completed an online admissions application	73%	65%
Viewed a virtual tour	55%	66%
Completed a financial aid estimator form	54%	80%
Completed a tuition cost calculator	50%	76%
Requested a campus visit by completing a form	50%	65%
Read profiles of faculty	37%	49%
E-mailed a faculty member	36%	59%
Read profiles of current students	35%	41%
Entered information about your interests to see a personalized Web page	33%	45%

Return engagement. When they return to your site as seniors or after submitting their application, traditional-age students have already checked you out — you've made their initial cut — and their needs are different from their earlier exploration. Again from Royall & Company:

Seniors have already been through this screening process. They are using Web sites to inform their decision of where to apply, to develop a strong application, and to make a final choice from among schools in their consideration set. Some of the topics will be the same ones they viewed as sophomores and juniors at the Web sites of those schools on their short lists.<sup>4</sup>

What this means in practical terms is that seniors are going to go deeper and broader than younger students. They'll visit academic department Web sites (we know that academic department Web sites are problematic for every institution, but finding a way to make them showcase the department and faculty is essential to capturing the interest of well-qualified

applicants), residence halls, the athletics department, and perhaps the alumni Web site. The virtual tour and images of campus will help them imagine themselves on campus.

If you're aiming to attract adult learners, clear organization and great search elements are absolutely essential. Adult learners are busy and have even less time for a feature or information that gets in the way of finding out what a program has to offer them. They'll want to find out quickly when and where programs are offered; what certifications they'll attain; and what kind of investment they must make.

**Making the decision.** Once a prospect has applied and been accepted, the Web site continues to serve as a key source of information to inform his or her final choice. Depth is essential. By this point, a prospect will have learned how to get around your site, even if it's not well organized. But it will be, won't it?

This is where blogs and/or a site for accepted students can be crucial; I discuss both below. But, more importantly, facilitating a campus visit and encouraging communication with staff, and perhaps with faculty and students, will help to seal the decision in a way that the best website in the world won't.

## **Messaging**

Focusing on developing messages for prospective students is essential in building a great Web site for them. Messaging goes beyond the words on a page; it's woven into the fabric of the site through clear information architecture and the words you use as labels for links.

It should go without saying that prospective students don't understand (or even heed) your institution's organization or special terminology. They don't recognize the acronyms that everyone in academia loves. They don't know where in your college structure an academic department might be located — nor do they care. They don't even know that at your institution a “major” (the term they recognize) is called an “academic program.”

You have an opportunity to show them what makes your institution different. Don't just talk about your international programs; figure out ways to help prospects experience them. Show them what's happening in your classrooms and your labs. If you say your institution changes lives, prove it!

On contemporary college Web sites, user-generated content — usually embodied in student-authored blogs — is the sort of content that prospective students particularly value. Unvarnished blog posts written by real students in their own words — with occasional grammatical errors and misspellings — seems real in a way that your carefully crafted copy can't.

In short, it's authentic. Yes, authentic is a huge buzzword these days,<sup>5</sup> partly because young people — traditional-age prospective students included — appreciate and respect authenticity. And they value the opinions of their peers. So no wonder they like to see blog content, especially blog content written by students who look pretty much like them. Many college and university admissions offices are using student-authored blogs on their Web sites; Ball State University has

one of the best blogging programs (see Ball State’s blogs here: [www.bsu.edu/reallife/](http://www.bsu.edu/reallife/)). MIT takes this approach one step further; its admissions site feels and reads like a blog ([www.mitadmissions.org/blogs.shtml](http://www.mitadmissions.org/blogs.shtml)).

And interestingly enough, Ball State learned that one key audience that liked its blogs even better than prospective students was parents. So here’s yet another example of a communication that plays well for several important audiences.

Other institutions are experimenting with student-produced videos, carried on their own sites and on YouTube. (Duke, since 2003, has encouraged its students to produce videos about life on campus and holds a festival every year to screen these videos; see [www.duke.edu/froshlife/](http://www.duke.edu/froshlife/).) Like blogs, these videos are designed to provide an authentic, largely unfiltered look at life on campus from those who know it best. A similar approach is taken by Colby College, where “Inside Colby” is a Web site featuring podcasts, video and other material created by students ([www.insidecolby.com/](http://www.insidecolby.com/)).

Note that while prospective students do like blogs, and will comment on them, they may not be too interested in creating their own content. Though this generation consumes a lot of online content, they don’t produce much: 64 percent don’t make videos at all, and 14 percent make them but don’t share them. Only 8 percent reported uploading videos to YouTube. And only 14 percent write their own blogs.<sup>6</sup>

## **Look and Feel**

One essential learning is reinforced again and again in our testing with prospective students: the results that are often counterintuitive. The design that tests best with prospectives is not the one that designers and decision-makers prefer.

When we test our interface concepts with prospective students, we ask them for feedback about each design and we test the concepts against Web sites of competitor institutions. We also ask prospective students what a concept tells them about an institution. That way, we learn if what we’re trying to communicate — for example, messages about faculty quality, interactions between people on campus, the opportunities to have different kinds of learning experiences — resonates through the design.

A couple of years ago I wrote a blog post entitled “What Would Google Do?”<sup>7</sup>; here, I surmised, is what Google would do in designing a college or university site:

... Reduce the complexity. Chuck the dozens of links. Get rid of a lot of the extraneous words and images. Keep it clean. Make it scannable. If the School of Engineering achieves a large number of page views consistently, then link them from the home page. But not the School of Business if they have a tenth as many. [Google is ruthless about promoting links to its home page and will only do so if a program gets a huge number of visits.]

I'm not saying that this would be easy — or even that the sites we design for clients approach the Google ideal. But the question really is whether they should come as close as possible. Because here's yet another lesson from Google: Visitors actually reward simplicity if they can easily find what they want!

And these days, we often design a simpler concept as one of a range of options for our clients. This concept will probably be cleaner, have fewer links, use a limited number of images, and will probably not have any large Flash animation or video.

Recently, we tested four home page concepts for a client. Three had a mix of images, banners, events teasers, news items, etc. The fourth was much simpler: it had a single, large image that spanned the width of the screen and contained primary links for the main sections of the site. We wanted to know whether prospective students would prefer a more Google-like interface. We all preferred it, as did our clients — designers, enrollment management, admissions and senior administrators.

The upshot? In this particular instance, more was more. The people it was designed for didn't like the stripped-down interface. It scored significantly lower than the rest of the designs in terms of conveying the type of information that prospective students were hoping to find. Prospective students chose as their favorite a home page with multiple, smaller photos, profiles, news and events items, and navigation sets.

This isn't to say that your site can't get away with a very simple design. For example, look at what MIT has done with MIT.edu. A limited number of links carry the messages (though down "below" the home page, MIT websites can be very complex and dense with words, images, and other media). What's important is the testing that helps you determine if what you like speaks to your primary target audience—or leaves them flat.

### **Moving Visitors to Take Action**

The other essential component for your site is to make calls to action clear and compelling. Be clear about what calls to action are important to your prospective students. Here are some important actions:

- Contact an admissions counselor
- Request more information (Be careful here. What information are they requesting? What do they need to do to get it?)
- Sign up for a campus visit
- Ask a question of a current student
- Contact an admissions counselor via IM
- Apply
- Check the status of your application

There are others, of course. But these are some of the most important. Note that certain calls to action are absent from this list: "Personalize this page" is one of them. While this is an action desired by marketers, today's generation of students seems not to value personalized Web sites, at least before they apply. This is a reflection of the "secret shopper" trend, where students research

colleges and make their decisions about where to apply, and then expect a much richer interaction after their application. I call this “the shopping effect,” and my own model is sites like Amazon.com or Netflix, where you can learn a great deal about a product before you actually buy it.<sup>8</sup>

### **The Role of Technology**

If your Web site is your most important communication with prospective students, then the tools you use to manage your site(s) are key investments. In our Internet strategy and Web development practice, we’ve focused on content management strategies because they are an institutional necessity when the responsibility for content development and Web site maintenance are distributed across many departments. A good content management system is essential because it can help to standardize institutional branding across the site; make updating the interface and navigating the site almost effortless; and ease the burden of site maintenance. More importantly, a good CMS can allow you to take advantage of great content by syndicating it across the site.

We believe that there is a significant role for technologies such as Flash, video, blogs, social networking tools, IM, and chats — though Noel-Levitz reports that the students they question are often skeptical about some or all of these tools. For example, only 9 percent of the class of 2007 said they had downloaded a podcast, and only 36 percent said they were interested in doing so.<sup>9</sup>

As far as social networking is concerned, the jury is still out. We believe that there is a role for an accepted student Web site that incorporates blogs, a social network and (perhaps) integrates with Facebook. In the pre-Facebook-era, institutions that tried these types of sites were very successful; examples include Lewis & Clark College, Eckerd College, and others.

The class of 2007 responded positively to having colleges and universities establish a presence on Facebook and other social networking sites (61 percent said it was “hot”), but students said they did not necessarily want to be recruited through social networking sites. Noel-Levitz concludes, “While there appears to be a segment of the prospective student population interested in connecting with colleges through social networking or blogs, there is not an overwhelming demand for them.”<sup>10</sup>

In any case, whatever technology you use shouldn’t be about the technology; it should be completely transparent to the visitor to your site.

### **In the End, It’s Integration That Matters**

I’ve been focused on Internet and Web strategy in education since 1995, and it’s no surprise to me that as the Web has grown to be more significant as a marketing resource, institutions have also focused on the importance of integrating their marketing and branding activities. Though we at mStoner always recognized the deep connections between online and offline activities, our clients couldn’t always take the steps that would have allowed them to integrate their communications to any significant degree. Now things have changed completely: Clients not only recognize the value of integrating their messages and marketing across channels, but are willing to

pay for it and to take actions and make organizational changes to accomplish tight integration. Today, at progressive institutions, a Web site isn't an afterthought, it's a strategic investment, and resourced appropriately.

Using your Web site to recruit prospective students is not rocket science, but it should be part of a well-planned and thoughtfully executed strategy that takes into account multiple communications channels. However, on your campus, as on others, it is probably not too well understood (at least from the perspective of prospective student visitors) nor adequately resourced. It's time to address these issues and to bring your site to the point where it can help you compete effectively for today's Web-savvy multitaskers — and their parents.

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