Innovations in Education and Technology

Use of Social Networking for Dental Hygiene Program Recruitment

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Introduction

Social networking has become one of the most popular and effective means of communication used in our society today, especially with the Millennial generation (defined as those born after 1980). Because of the changing dynamics of this generation, it is necessary to consider different recruitment tactics employed by college programs to attract this population. Characteristics of this generation include constant, open communication, personal fulfillment and positive reinforcement with multiple mentors.[1] Social networking can be used to advertise virtually anything from entertainment (including restaurants, venues and events), to the health profession, sports, politics, literature and education programs.

Facebook, one of the most popular social networking mediums, has evolved from a social web site used mostly by college students, to a medium that can be used by virtually anyone who wishes to advertise a product. Facebook allows users to design and create a profile, which acts as a personalized website. The unique aspect of Facebook is that it enables social interaction within the site. The creator (or administrator) is able to control virtually every aspect of communication within the page. This includes who can access and contribute to what is presented within the profile, post links, photos, comments and discussions.

Graduate school admissions and college officers are using Facebook for recruiting, instead of relying on more traditional methods like mass mailings or emails. They are able to communicate with potential students and provide up–to–date news on the school.[2] Nora Barnes, director for the Center for Marketing Research at the University of Massachusetts–

Abstract

Purpose: Social networking has become a popular and effective means of communication used by students in the millennial generation. Academic admissions officers are beginning to utilize social networking methods for recruitment of students. However, the dental hygiene literature has reported little information about the use of social networking for recruitment strategies.. This paper describes one institutions' process of creating and implementing a social network site for prospective and current students.

Keywords: Social networking, recruitment, admissions, dental hygiene, technology

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Dartmouth, confirmed this method of recruitment: "If you're an undergraduate or graduate institution and you're looking to attract people 35 and under, then I think you have to go to Facebook because that's where your opportunity is."[2] This type of social networking medium is one of the most promising recruitment tactics for Dental Hygiene programs appealing to Millennials.

Development of the Social Network

In August 2009, Dr. Nancy Williams, Graduate Program Director for the University of Tennessee Health Science Center Master of Dental Hygiene Program (UTHSC MDH), proposed the idea of creating a Facebook page for the UTHSC MDH program. She indicated that she would like it presented in a professional way, allowing prospective students to become acquainted with the program, as well as creating a place for current MDH students to interact. Thus, the UTHSC MDH Facebook page, a site for both prospective and current students, was developed.

To begin the process of creating the UTHSC MDH

group page, several education–related pages were evaluated to study different layouts and designs. Initially, the page was set up as a "closed network," meaning a member had to be invited to join the page. The creator of the page was appointed as the sole administrator. Only the creator had access to page design and the ability to post topics, photos and links. In designing the page, the information section was developed first, including a brief description of the UTHSC MDH Program and an email contact. Next, links to the MDH curriculum and the UTHSC MDH website were added. An additional link to Dr. Kathleen King's website, the keynote speaker for the 2 previous years at the MDH summer week, was also included.

Under the discussion board section of the page, several topics were posted. Members of the page could post personal entries related to the topics, which included: the MDH summer week, former graduates' discussion of where they were currently employed, personal experiences with the MDH program, upcoming meetings and an invitation for prospective MDH students to submit questions. Dr. Nancy Williams, the MDH graduate program director, was added as an administrator, and her email address was provided. "Friend requests" were sent to all of the current MDH students, several past MDH graduates, current faculty members and some administrators. Dr. Susan Crim, the Dental Hygiene Department Chair, was contacted requesting permission to place a link to the MDH facebook page on the UTHSC Dental Hygiene website. The page had to be reviewed and approved by UTHSC administrators, as this was a relatively new concept. An information technology specialist was added as an administrator, in accordance with UTHSC protocol when using their website. The American Dental Hygienists' Association was also contacted, requesting to have a link to the page listed on their website.

After a link to the page was posted on the UTHSC MDH website, the settings for the page were modified, thereby creating an open network, so anyone could have access without needing an invite or requesting to join. Any member of the group page could post topics on the discussion board, add links or write on the wall. For the photo section, class composites of all 4 of the MDH classes that have been enrolled in the program beginning with the class of 2006 were posted. Also posted were photos of current faculty members, photos from MDH summer week and photos of MDH students at their graduation. Several photos depict activities from MDH summer week, including classroom/lecture, sightseeing activities and restaurant activities, all making the summer week look appealing and exciting. After uploading and posting the photos, they were tagged, which refers to a means of identifying the subjects of photos. In this instance, MDH students and faculty were tagged, and an email was then sent to the tagged individual alerting them that a picture identifying them had been posted on the page. Several students have contributed comments in the photo section.

At the beginning of January 2010, MDH applicants were invited to join the page, enabling prospective students to get a more personal feel for the program. They would be able to read the interactions between current and former students and faculty, and see photos. The photos and discussion board posts related to MDH week would allow the student to get an idea of what transpires during this period. Current students have been encouraged via email and through class discussion boards to visit the page and contribute to discussion board posts, including their experiences with MDH week, and upcoming meetings or events.

Participation from current MDH students is a challenge, due to time constraints. To address this concern, a short survey asking current MDH students to provide feedback on the page was sent out. The questions addressed the students' access to the page, whether they had posted comments and if they felt the page was beneficial to current students and/or prospective applicants. The general consensus was that the page was indeed being used and it was beneficial, especially for the purpose of recruiting prospective applicants. For current students, although they enjoyed having access to the page, time was a factor in using the page on a regular basis. From a recruiting perspective, students admitted to the MDH class of 2010 are now joining the page, contributing to the posts and asking questions, which serves to benefit all of the incoming students. Prior to this social network, students would have had to address the program director individually with their concerns.

Social Networking and College Recruitment

Although there is no current literature available for social networking and recruitment for dental hygiene programs, there is literature addressing current trends in college recruitment. In a report by Noel–Levitz, one of the strategies that is suggested for campus e–recruitment programs involves making the recruitment process a social experience.[3] A key strategy for any e–recruitment communication program is that it must allow personalization that encourages socialization. Students are looking for places where they can interact through blogs, instant messaging and social networking pages related to the program they want to study. "The authen-

tic voices of your students, faculty, staff, and alumni are important and compelling."[3]

One social networking site called Zinch is specifically geared to network with colleges. Students can fill out personal profiles that give colleges their information. Over 450 colleges use this site as a recruiting tool, and over 300,000 students currently make themselves available for the website. "Many traditional recruiters and training and development services may soon find themselves out of business unless they take advantage of the social networking revolution and its growing impact on business and training."[4]

The National Association for College Admission Counseling has conducted research indicating that the use of social networking tools is increasing in college admission offices. "Eighty–eight percent of admission offices believed social media were either 'somewhat' or 'very' important to their future recruitment efforts."[5] Additional research needs to be done concerning the success of recruitment for colleges and the cost/benefit relationship when using social media. Ethical and legal issues and the establishment of formal policies for the use of social media in recruitment and admissions also need to be addressed.[5]

According to a report on college recruiting of Millennials, social media will change the way almost all recruiting takes place.[6] Students are accustomed to having information available on a website all the time. It is no longer practical for university administrators to designate specified times and places for recruitment. "The smart organization will have an up–to–date, youth–oriented website for college recruiting and offer a variety of ways to interview, including online and virtual interviews," and this type of recruiting will allow colleges to create relationships with prospective students and recruit them over time.[6] This virtual experience for students allows them to access the information on their own terms.

With the UTHSC MDH page, students are able to use the site on an as needed basis. Prospective applicants can access the site for program information, and they are able to see the interaction between current MDH students and faculty, as well as ask questions about the program. They can get a more personal feel for what the program can offer.

Conclusion

The current literature on college recruiting emphasizes the importance of social networking for successful recruiting. Because it is a relatively new concept, the use of social networking for students that are not part of the millennial generation is a more challenging dilemma. Encouraging social networking with this particular group of students is not too difficult – with the MDH program at UTHSC, online communication is already part of the program. As a result, students are engaged in a kind of social networking already. From a recruiting standpoint, as long as the MDH page is attracting attention to prospective and recently admitted students, this project has been a worthwhile endeavor. Current students can still enjoy the benefits of using the page on an as needed basis.

In March of 2010, a formal request was sent to Dr. Nancy Williams and Dr. Susan Crim to continue the administration of the UTHSC MDH page as a capstone project. This will allow the monitoring of the page for 2 more years of classes entering the program, and will give the administrators a better feel for the benefit of social networking for program recruitment and current students.

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Acknowledgments

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