



Engagement Marketing Revisited How to Embrace the New Social Media Tools

By Alex Brown, Internet marketing and social media consultant

In 2006 I authored a white paper with Zehno titled “Engagement Marketing,” in which I developed a framework to better understand how to develop marketing programs within the context of “free marketing”—marketing that is not directly controlled by the marketer. It is “free” as akin to freedom of speech.

Where traditional marketing is a one-way conversation punctuated with focus groups for feedback, engagement marketing is a true dialog where anyone can speak—and everyone can listen.

At that time we focused on the social media tools of the day: blogs, wikis and discussion boards. This paper reevaluates that framework, three years later, within the context of social media networks that include Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Flickr.

This paper explores these ideas using the MBA applicant marketplace as a case study, but the concepts apply to all levels of educational marketing.

UNDERSTANDING THE THREE CIRCLES OF MARKETING

The framework comprises three concentric circles:

- The inner circle, controlled by the marketer, is the traditional “command and control” marketing program.
- The outer circle represents “free marketing”: content about a school generated by customers and others outside of the control of the marketer.
- The middle circle represents the opportunities for marketers to engage the outer circle and participate in and develop conversations.





So how are the circles changing? The inner circle continues to shrink as customers participate more and more in social networks and use their peers as references for decision making. The outer circle has significantly expanded with new social networking tools making access to the conversation more available to all. And the middle circle continues to grow as marketers learn how to use social media tools to engage their audiences.

Traditional marketing programs remain important to establish a baseline for branding, but they are much more effective when combined with a social media strategy that engages audiences with the social Web of Facebook, Twitter, blogs, YouTube and more.

THE INNER CIRCLE: TRADITIONAL MARKETING

Before the advent of the Internet and the World Wide Web, marketing was all about the inner circle. Schools controlled their branding and messaging via carefully developed MBA program brochures, attendance at recruiting events, and so forth. The Internet increased schools' reach with the use of a traditional Web site, but the control over branding and messaging still remained with the marketer.

However, with the development of blogs and the advent of the social Web, traditional marketing programs are becoming less relevant on their own.

THE OUTER CIRCLE: FREE MARKETING

The outer circle represents the conversations your audiences are having with one another, and with your students, on the social Web. This content is considered "free" because it retains an essence of freedom, uninhibited by a school's branding strategy. It is also "free" because it is freely available to anyone adept with a search engine. Schools do not generate this content, but they need to track the conversations, and to participate and even promote, when and where appropriate.

The original engagement marketing paper discussed the free content generated by blogs, wikis and discussion boards. These sources of content persist—and are growing. There are new MBA applicant bloggers each year. Applicant bloggers become student bloggers. Sites operated by Clear Admit and Accept.com host content including applicant-posted school interview reports. Discussion boards, such as the one hosted by *Business Week*, allow applicants to exchange ideas and feedback with each other, and with the schools that do participate (engagement again).

The reality is that more of our audience is now spending more time on social networks. In some instances applicants are spending time on these networks at the expense of time on e-mail, which is starting to become the equivalent of "snail mail."



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Cross Media Communications

Content that is developed by candidates on these social networks comes in smaller chunks and is widely dispersed. Three years ago we had a dozen bloggers blogging about their business school application experience. Now we have thousands of applicants on Facebook and Twitter. Many contribute applicant-related content, others simply read content, but all have access to search, which makes content easy to find.

And bloggers, tweeters and those on Facebook are more able to find each other. Those considering the same schools can now connect before the schools themselves connect their applicants and students. This is an important shift to consider when marketing to and developing communities of admitted students.

With so much content readily available, is it a surprise that applicant-related businesses are building hubs for social media content? Clear Admit hosts a wiki with updated interview reports. Clear Admit also lists all of the active MBA bloggers and tweeters.

The explosion of handheld devices like iPhones and Blackberrys makes social media content easier and faster to create and access. For example, a photo sent via Twitpic to Twitter by a student on a campus visit, can end up in a school's Google search results within 24 hours.

But what's the appeal of all this user-generated content? *Its authenticity.* Students and applicants freely exchange ideas and likely trust their peers more than the marketing departments of the institutions they are considering. *It's readily available.* And it is competing for mindshare with school-developed marketing content.



Clear Admit aggregates applicant, student and administrative tweeters and bloggers to write weekly columns about what is going on in the MBA blogosphere and twitterverse.

blog.clearadmit.com/2009/10/twitter-thursdays-news-from-mba-programs-3



THE MIDDLE CIRCLE: ENGAGEMENT MARKETING

The decision

With so much free content out there, in more and more social networking environments, schools have three options:

- To continue as if this phenomenon was not going to impact their communications strategy. Of course that would be folly.
- To track and monitor content in the various networks. This can provide valuable feedback about the school brand and the concerns of the applicant pool at various stages of the process.
- To actively participate in the networks and serve as an aggregation point (social media hub) for the free content that is relevant to the school. Engage in conversations while also engaging your audiences in your marketing program.

This paper is obviously written with the final two options in mind.

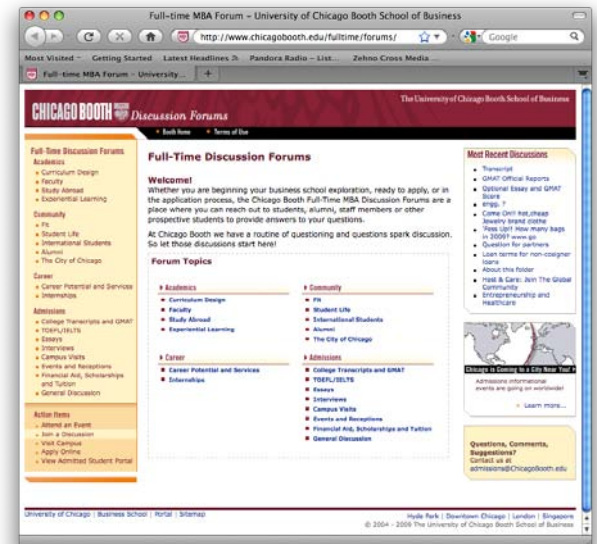
The tools

The middle circle continues to develop as more schools explore these social media tools:

Discussion boards—Discussion boards remain a popular means of discourse, both among applicants and between applicants, students and admissions offices. *Business Week's* discussion board is the best known, although its popularity is eroding given the breadth of other social media options.

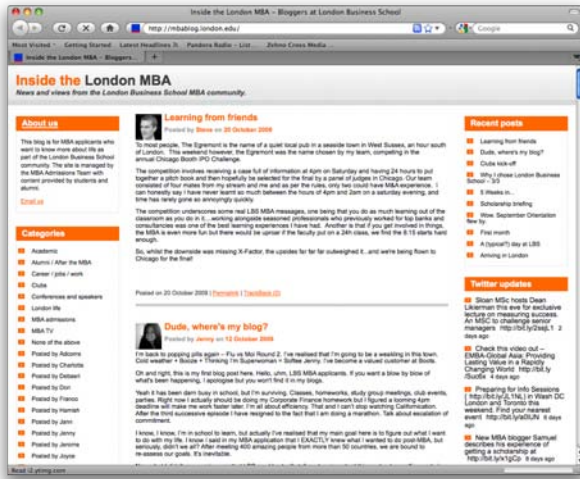
Schools can participate on the *Business Week* discussion boards by starting and monitoring a thread. Or they can simply observe the discussion board to learn what is on the minds of the applicants who frequent those boards.

A few schools, like Wharton and Chicago, maintain discussion boards on their own Web sites. For a discussion board to be successful it requires a lot of participation, so adopting a discussion board is really only realistic for large schools with correspondingly large audiences.



Chicago GSB Discussion Board

www.chicagobooth.edu/fulltime/forums



London Business School Admissions Blog
mbablog.london.edu

Admissions blogs—All schools can start admissions blogs because success is much less dependent on the size of the audience. The blog can also serve as a central point for other social media initiatives. A blog allows a site to publish fresh content on a regular basis, with the content relevant to the stage in the admissions cycle of the applicant pool and to the goings-on at the business school.

If students at the MBA programs are blogging, schools can integrate the student blog entries with the main admissions blog, as London Business School does, or at least link to the student blogs.

The key here is to show authentic content, and to encourage applicants to return. Schools can do this either by promoting subscriptions to the blog's RSS feed or by posting the blog entries to Twitter.



The Richard Ivey School of Business at the University of Western Ontario Facebook fan page
www.facebook.com/iveymba?ref=nf

Facebook—While there is resistance from some schools to join Facebook because of its personal nature, the reality is that this is where many applicants spend significant chunks of their online time.

A school can set up a group page and/or a fan page.

A group page offers a messaging function that allows the school to communicate with all the group members. Given other means to push out content to applicants, this feature may be redundant.

The fan page generates a feed that can then be tracked by its members, and it provides analytics. And do not be deterred by the label "fan page." The name may not seem appropriate, but the page functionality is a perfect fit for educational institutions.



HOW TO SHAPE SOCIAL MEDIA CONTENT INTO INSTITUTIONAL STORIES

What's the next step in maximizing social media? Instead of merely collecting content, the Tulane Experience microsite plucks content from blogs, YouTube and Twitter and shapes it into a meaningful whole. By selecting existing content—and using the multimedia-friendly Tumblr platform—Tulane didn't have to create a Web experience from the ground up. Here are the key steps for creating this type of microsite:



- **Put together a plan.** Determine your key messages, identify the existing content that tells those key stories and decide how frequently you'll post updates. This is the step that failed projects usually skip!
- **Take inventory of existing content.** Use what you've already got. Tulane had robust student blogs, video clips and a b-school Tweeter. The challenge was to bring all these pieces together.
- **Focus on the short-term (but don't forget about the long term).** This type of site works best when it's updated often. But it's essential to balance day-to-day posting with long-term projects, like video shoots or new audio slide shows that have to be built from scratch.
- **Choose a tool that gets you halfway there.** Don't reinvent the wheel. This site is built using Tumblr, a blogging platform that integrates easily with social media, offers easy-to-use templates and makes it easy to have a customized domain name without actually hosting everything on your server.
- **Stay focused on your goals, not the tech tools.** Many tech tools perform similar functions these days (Garage Band or Soundslides for audio slide shows, Blogspot or Wordpress for blogs), so don't get sidetracked looking for the perfect tool.
- **Stick it out.** This type of Web site requires weekly (if not daily) feeding. So stay committed!

Tulane Experience microsite
experience.freeman.tulane.edu/

Twitter—Twitter has received wider adoption—at this stage—over Facebook in business school admissions. Many admissions directors have started tweeting, as have MBA students, deans and faculty members. It is important for schools to make sure their designated tweeters are readily accessible to their audiences.

The whole concept of Twitter is that multiple short messages can be more effective than a handful of long ones.



It is important to consider whether Twitter is being used to simply push out short messages or instead to engage the Twitter community and respond to fellow “Tweeps.” The latter requires ongoing observation of the audience members a school follows.

YouTube—Schools have two options: a channel or a group. A YouTube channel allows a school to add video content that it creates. A channel has obvious uses for a school, but it requires constant attention to developing new content.



The University of Georgia Terry Full-Time MBA Program Twitter

twitter.com/terrymba

Essentially you are engaging your audiences to augment your marketing program.

Creating a YouTube group will allow anyone to post content.

The user-created videos are not only aggregated in one place (and linked to from the main Web site), but also are easily searchable. One good idea is to combine a YouTube group with a contest that incentivizes current students to create and publish content. With multiple contributors, you can generate more content. But realize that they won’t all speak in the institution’s voice. That’s the point!

Flickr—On Flickr, and other photo hosting sites, images tagged with the school name help present an image—and brand—for the school. Setting up a Flickr group can help aggregate all relevant content in one convenient place while encouraging audiences to post their own images. Again, engaging your audiences to augment your marketing program. And because all the content is searchable, images are easy to locate.

9 WAYS TO GET THE MOST OUT YOUR SOCIAL MEDIA

The secret to success in an engagement marketing program is to integrate a social media strategy with each social media network used, as well as with the main admissions Web site. The Richard Ivey School of Business social media page, an aggregation point for all the school’s social media content, is a great example to follow. Here’s how to set up the right media—and get them to work together:

1. Do your research. Find out where your audiences are on the social web, and listen.
2. Be sure each of your social media efforts comes with a plan, along with an overall plan for integrating each one.
3. Establish a blog that serves up timely updates. This blog should be linked from the main admissions Web site.



4. Set up a Twitter account and tweet about each blog entry, as well as other relevant content. Integrate the Twitter feed with the blog by including the feed on the blog template. Also include a space on the blog template for links to all students who blog and tweet.
5. Include a link to the school's YouTube group, once video content has been developed by current students. Not enough content? Create a competition to generate it.
6. Set up a Facebook fan page. Integrate the page with the blog by linking and keeping it updated as the blog is updated. While it may seem redundant to have similar content in a blog, on Facebook and Twitter, remember that some of your audience gets its online content from Facebook, some from Twitter, and some directly from your Web site.
7. If your school has multiple Facebook pages (a university page, business school page and an MBA page, for example), link to them all. Encourage applicants to join each group.
8. The same goes for Twitter pages. If the dean tweets, make sure your candidates know.
9. **Put someone in charge.** All of this requires someone to lead the social media initiative who is passionate about social media. If no staff members are interested, look to the current student body for a volunteer. Social media execution is not something an outside firm can—or should—do for you.



Engagement marketing is a long-term commitment and requires authenticity on the part of the schools. That may be why some institutions view social media as a risk. But the most risky choice a school can make is to do nothing. The outer circle remains, regardless of decisions made with respect to developing a middle circle of engagement.

Zehno has worked with many schools and programs to help effectively plan and produce communications campaigns that work in today's world. To learn more, call 1-800-860-1079 or write to info@zehno.com.