Interview

Social Networking: The New Face of Recruiting

A Q&A with Brad Ward, electronic communication coordinator for Butler University, on new methods for reaching prospective students

- By Linda L. Briggs
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Social networking sites aren't just for fun. In what may be the future for college recruiting efforts, some 300,000 students now use a social networking site called Zinch specifically to network with colleges. On Zinch, prospective students can enter a personal profile that gives colleges in-depth information well beyond grades and test scores. From the other side, Zinch says that more than 450 colleges and universities are using Zinch as a high-powered recruiting tool.

And who better than someone fresh out of college himself to understand the power of cutting-edge tools for recruiting? In this interview, we talk with Brad Ward, electronic communication coordinator for Butler University in Indiana, which has about 3,900 undergraduates.

Ward, who graduated from the University of Illinois in 2005, talks about his successes with Zinch, which he started using in mid-2007, and other online tools he's used in recruiting efforts at Butler. He also talks about the problems social networking sites can spawn if you don't stay on top of them.

Linda Briggs: How would you describe your job as electronic communication coordinator at Butler University?

Brad Ward: It's really a new position; we're still trying to define it. I basically oversee all the e-mails for recruitment and content. I started in June.... In a way, it's nice that I'm only 24, so I can still relate to the kids. But at the same time, when I was in college there was no YouTube or Facebook until my senior year.

Briggs: Can you tell me a little bit about how Zinch works?

Ward: Kids on Zinch set up profiles ... that are more than just their names and test scores. They can list extracurricular activities. They can put if they're a first-generation student, or their ethnicity. There's a lot of depth to it.

Briggs: And how do colleges use that information for recruiting?
Ward: We can go in [to Zinch], and, if we're looking for kids in a certain state to reach out to, we can filter by the state. Then if we wanted to filter by what year they're graduating high school or what their gender is or something like that, we can really drill down.

[That makes] e-mail more than just broadcasting a message to thousands of kids. With these social networking sites, we can really narrow it down and make it more refined. We can target a lot better who we're trying to reach. That's definitely a huge benefit to social networking sites for us.

With Zinch, it's truly just kids looking for schools. Students can't add each others' friends or network in that sense. So the kids on there are definitely interested in going to college and interested in finding out more about schools.

Zinch has some forums and things like that, but, if I were a high school student joining this site, I'm not joining it to hook up with other friends--the sorts of things you would do on Facebook.

Briggs: You mention some pretty impressive recruiting numbers in blogging about your success with Zinch, like an "open rate" of 35 percent. What does that mean?

Ward: [Using Zinch] we filtered a certain group of kids that we wanted to send a message to. That means 35 percent of the kids we sent the message to opened it on Zinch.

Briggs: And that's a pretty high number for e-mail?

Ward: Yes. We usually average about 11 [percent] to 13 percent [at that time of year] for larger e-mail blasts--just a blast-out-of-nowhere message to these kids. We're seeing about three times the open rate on Zinch.

Briggs: To what do you attribute that?

Ward: I think the kids on Zinch are obviously interested in colleges, so they want to hear what we have to say. And it's also just a whole "me" generation thing with these kids. For us to be going out there and finding them--I think they find something special about that. "Wow, this school is coming to talk to me; I'm not [having to go] to talk to them."

Briggs: Have you seen anything else out there like Zinch?

Ward: I haven't, no. It seems unique.

Briggs: You've also used other electronic tools for recruiting in interesting ways. What is the student blogger program you have there at Butler?

Ward: We have eight students that just blog about what they're doing every week. It gives people an idea of what it would be like to go here. There's two staff bloggers, and our mascot has a blog--we have an actual bulldog on campus, and one of the workers is his caretaker, so he writes a blog as if the mascot [were] speaking. It's pretty funny.

We put a Facebook advertisement out at the beginning of the year and said we were looking for students who want to blog. We had about 50 kids respond. So we put an application together and just kind of narrowed it down to get a good mix of the student population here on campus.
It's been going really well. It's the most popular area of the entire admission site. The student bloggers and the forums have more page views than any other part of the [Butler] site. We just launched it at the beginning of this year, and it's been going really well.

Briggs: Are there other online tools that you've had recruiting success with as well?

Ward: There are a lot of choices out there. We're experimenting with YouTube right now, with our Butler bloggers. We've purchased a little video camera ... with a USB port. Our bloggers just come to my office, take it for a few days, then put their videos on YouTube and bring it back. We're seeing some good results so far. We've only been doing that for about a month, but a couple of our videos have seen about a hundred hits already.

Briggs: What kinds of things are your student bloggers creating for YouTube?

Ward: The most popular video is when one of the female bloggers took the camera into her sorority house and did a seven-minute tour. I think kids find that interesting because you're obviously not going to get that on a tour. We have very nice sorority and fraternity houses so it was a good video.

Another popular video [shows] Coach Boone, who is the coach featured in [the movie] "Remember the Titans," on campus speaking. That student-life aspect is popular. "What am I going to see here?" "What am I going to do?" And basketball games and things like that are always popular.

Briggs: So it's students talking to students in a medium that they understand.

Ward: Exactly.

Briggs: In terms of recruiting tools, what else besides Zinch and YouTube have you tried?

Ward: Are you familiar with the fan pages now on Facebook? We have one of those set up for the bloggers, so that kids on Facebook can ask the bloggers a question there. We haven't really started promoting that yet. It's just there in case a kid runs across it. Right now, we're [mainly] using that to direct traffic over to our main blogs, which are on our admission site.

[Speaking of Facebook], when I got here in June of last year I did a search for Butler Class of 2011. There was a group that a student had started [in Facebook] with about 200 kids in it. By the end of the summer, there were 750 kids--and our incoming class was only 950.

Briggs: So most of your incoming students were talking to each other on Facebook?

Ward: Yes. But what we were noticing is that everyone was asking questions, but since they were all incoming freshmen, nobody really knew the answers. The story I always tell everybody is this one: Someone asked if there was wireless in the dorms. Someone else said, "I think on my tour they said no."

Briggs: And that wasn't true?

Ward: No. We have wireless in all our dorms.... There are lots of other examples.

So I've started tracking the 2012 group already. It went over 100 students this weekend. I'm trying to use my blogger students to watch that a little bit and just make sure there's correct information there. I don't think the kids would view administrators or employees going in there very well. A lot of the kids that are posting on there aren't quite sure if they're coming to Butler yet.... They're looking at schools,

http://campustechnology.com/Articles/2008/03/Social-Networking-The-New-Face-of-Recr... 6/18/2009
and they're using this to gather some more information, so we don't really want to go in there and try to look official. Our student bloggers just kind of keep an eye on it.

Briggs: In some ways, you seem the face of the future of college recruiting--in that you're starting to use these electronic tools effectively.

Ward: We're getting there. When I came on board, we didn't have the bloggers, the forums, or any of that, so that was my job.... I would say we're doing well. We have a ways to go. I don't know what the definition of cutting edge is for admissions because I think in general most departments are behind.

Briggs: Because they're not using social networking and other online tools as effectively as they could be?

Ward: Right. [Another problem is], in terms of YouTube and sites [like it], there's not yet a defined metric of what is successful. If we put these videos up on YouTube, was that worth it? There's nothing to measure this stuff with yet.

That makes it a little tougher when we try and pitch these new sites and new ways to recruit. Hopefully, in the near future, we'll all start to be able to define what success is and whether it's worth it to be on Facebook and those kinds of sites.

Ward blogs about his recruiting efforts here.

About the Author

Linda L. Briggs is a freelance writer based in San Diego, Calif.