

Site benefits from students' point of view

Integrated Marketing Communications in the University of Tennessee's College of Business Administration is a senior-level elective for undergraduate students. Working in teams, students are asked to apply their four years of business knowledge to develop a real-world integrated marketing communications plan for an area organization.

Last spring, students worked with eCampusTours.com to enhance awareness of the Web site and increase visits to the site by college-bound students.

The company: eCampusTours.com, a division of student loan provider Edsouth, is a college-planning Web site created in 2000. The site features 360-degree virtual campus tours to more than 1,300 colleges. Students can save favorite tours and articles, as well as schedule visits to participating schools. On average, eCampusTours receives more than 150,000 unique visitors per month.

eCampusTours includes articles about college planning, campus life, career exploration and paying for college. The site contains a database with information on more than 10,000 scholarships, and every year several \$1,000 scholarships are awarded to randomly-selected winners.

Students: Undergraduate students Daniel Degaetano, Joseph Cones, Jessica Mathews, Kat Cheshire and Victoria Montgomery were supervised by Cindy Raines, course lecturer and director of communications for the College of Business Administration.

Approach: The students investigated the company's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. They also conducted an inclusive customer analysis that homed in on the target audience's values and needs. The group established an annual objective of increasing site visitation by more than 130,000 students with 40,000 visiting the site more than once.

Team members analyzed potential branding initiatives, key positioning alternatives, regional opportunities and a core messaging strategy — how does eCampusTours.com want to differentiate itself among its competition to attract and build loyalty with



its designated target audience? The group evaluated graphic imaging opportunities; traditional and nontraditional marketing channels; the use of public relations, events and sponsorships; and the use of consumer promotions and give-aways.

Result: The students recognized that lack of awareness among the target audience was a major issue for the Web site.

The group proposed a new positioning statement, "100s of campuses ... only a mouse click away," to reinforce the site's comprehensive offerings of information and ease of use.

Although the group's marketing plan needed to have a national reach, the group's marketing research discovered that the Northeast would be the most opportune area to focus its campaign because its students more frequently attend out-of-state colleges than any other region of the country. The group also identified students who are the first sibling to attend college, as they wouldn't have older siblings to help influence their college decisions.

The states the group focused on included Vermont, New Hampshire, Connecticut, Maine, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, Maryland and Delaware. Six of these states ranked among the top 12 nationally in terms of the percentage of first-time, first-year freshmen leaving their home state for college. Nationally, 24 per-

cent of first-time freshmen leave their state of residence. Vermont ranked second in the nation with 60 percent and New Hampshire ranked third with 53 percent.

The group's marketing plan focused on SAT centers in the eight chosen states; the group discovered that the majority of students in that targeted geographic area who aspire to attend college take the SAT test, ranging from 86 percent of college-bound students in Connecticut to 67 percent of college-bound students in Vermont. Not forgetting that their's was a nationwide campaign, the group decided to also market through DECA, a national association of high school students that promotes leadership, career preparation and community service. DECA exists in more than 4,500 schools and has 180,000 members.

The group proposed to set up a table and banner outside 420 SAT testing centers (210 centers during the spring and 210 centers during the fall) across the eight states. The eCampusTours.com representative staffing the table would encourage SAT testers to surf eCampusTours.com to experience first-hand the benefits of the site. The representative also would hand out a goody bag to each student leaving the test center. The branded eCampusTours.com bag would contain "post-exam nourishment," such as Smartees candies and fun facts

about different colleges. It also would contain an offer to download a free song from iTunes when the individual registered at eCampusTours.com.

To reach the DECA audience, the group recommended advertising in the DECA high school conference guide at the organization's four national conferences, advertising on the back cover of the January/February and September/October bi-annual issues (times when students were most considering colleges), and posting a year-round banner on the DECA main page.

Additional suggestions included:

- Adjusting the layout of the home page to emphasize that the site is a not-for-profit business, reducing any perception of "spam" possibly associated with the site;

- Adding to the Web site areas for social networking, fun and games, and college fun facts;

- Creating a campus search engine whereby a student could be aligned with a college similar to his or her personality by answering several key personality questions;

- Changing the site's primary colors from purple and lime green (research indicated that the purple reminded the target audience of children's television character Barney) to navy and lime green.

"The feedback gathered from the students' research combined with the comments generated from student interviews has helped to confirm our theories of what could make eCampusTours.com more popular among our target demographic," said Tanya Ickowitz, assistant vice president of Edsouth/eCampusTours.com. "The steps we would like to take to appeal to the younger generation do not necessarily match the corporate mind set, so by using this information, our creative team will be able to more soundly justify existing proposals to senior management."

Companies and organizations interested in participating as clients of the College of Business Administration's marketing students should contact Cindy Raines at craines1@utk.edu.