



Student Services Go Social

Colleges and universities are discovering that social networking and other advanced web tools are now key to improving student life.

By Matt Villano, Monica Gullon

Like fine wines, Web 2.0 technologies get better with age. Gone are the days of the pointless chat room; this is the era of social networking juggernauts such as Facebook, MySpace, and Friendster. Services offered by these firms are helpful in facilitating connections among users in every industry and of every age. In higher education, however, a handful of schools are using social networking services to set new benchmarks for communicating with students. Some of the schools on this list include Middlebury College (VT), the University of Arizona, and Tulane University (LA). Following is a look at how such institutions have embraced these new applications to keep their most important customers satisfied.

Eighteen months ago, the manager of the Middlebury College bookstore was unaware of Facebook. Today, he has set up a special Facebook page for the bookstore that boasts 1,200 fans and is leveraged for competitive edge, on campus and off.

Embracing Facebook

It's hard to believe that about 18 months ago, Bob Jansen, manager of the Middlebury College bookstore, was unaware of Facebook. Today, Jansen is all about the social networking site, having set up a special Facebook page for the bookstore that now boasts nearly 1,200 fans. More important: He's leveraged the site to gain a competitive edge, both on campus and off.



In case you've been living in a cave for the last two years, Facebook is the wildly successful social networking site launched in 2004 by Harvard (MA) whiz kid Mark Zuckerberg as a way for students (and others) to connect. Today, with 100 million users posting photos, videos, and comments, it's the most-trafficked social media site in the world. The downside? Only other Facebook registrants approved by siteholders as "friends" can access the content siteholders provide.

Back in 2007, when Jansen first gave the site a gander, he was surprised to learn that 93 percent of Middlebury students were on Facebook, and that most used it daily. Seeing an opportunity to reach out to students on a platform they were comfortable with, he joined the site, created a personal profile, and started promoting the store. Within weeks, he had amassed hundreds of friends.

That initial endeavor was a learning experience. Jansen first signed up under the name "Book Store"-- a violation of Facebook rules, which state that members must use their real names. He then edited his profile to tell users more about himself, but cleverly manipulated the space to convey information about the store. This time, Jansen posted photos of the store, video advertisements, and special discounts to his Facebook friends.

He also used the "update" and "event" features on the page to advertise promotional events at the brick-and-mortar store. The first event, dubbed "Friends of the Bookstore," was held that April. The parameters of this inaugural effort were simple: Everyone who came in and mentioned the Facebook page received 30 percent off.

"Turnout was amazing," remembers Jansen, who notes that sales increased 327 percent compared to SDLY (same day last year) on the clothing and gift items. Profitability doubled, even after accounting for the 30 percent discount. "That told me right then and there that there was something unique about this platform," he asserts.

Banking on this success, Jansen expanded his Facebook presence even more. Eventually, toward the end of last year (and with help from a student), he set up the "Fan Page," an independent space that he could use in tandem with his own network of friends to promote the store and inform users of upcoming news.

With this double-barreled approach, the bookstore manager advertised the store's second Facebook-only event: A "60-Second Shopping Spree" in October 2007. During this event, bookstore officials randomly selected two lucky students from a batch of 427 customers who showed up to shop for supplies over a three-day period. Just as the clock was set to start, bookstore employees ducktaped the winners together back-to-back, and gave them 60 seconds to conduct the spree.

Jansen videotaped the entire episode and immediately posted it on the store's Facebook page. Within 12 hours of an e-mail blast about the event, 30 new students were waiting to sign up as fans. "Generally speaking, Facebook promotions cost me

nothing, and they are many times more effective than print advertising," the manager says. "It's allowed me to connect effectively with students and get our message across."

Since the shopping spree, Jansen has held other events at the store and he advertises each of them on Facebook. In each case, anywhere from 500 to 700 current students participate. He also has put together Facebook promotions that extend to the school's e-commerce bookstore website. In some cases, these events have attracted alumni as well.

According to Jansen, the best part of using Facebook to connect with customers is that those students who have signed up as friends and fans can respond to event invitations and post comments, giving him *instant* feedback on specific promotions or marketing campaigns. "The whole experience becomes much more interactive," he says of the sales relationship on Facebook. "I also have started looking at people in terms of them being friends rather than customers." Moving forward, he'll continue to roll out Facebook-oriented promotions.

Toward the end of 2008, for example, Jansen installed technology in the store and on the store's e-commerce website to augment the power of Facebook by creating a customer rewards program. The program, Panther Rewards, allows customers the ability to earn 5 percent cash back on their purchases, and has increased traffic both in-store, online, and to Jansen's Facebook page as a whole. "My goal is to create a technology 'engagement vortex' that over time begins to draw most of the Middlebury College community and events on campus through my networks," he says.

Housing Without Hassle

Facebook isn't the only profile-oriented social networking service making waves these days in the world of higher education. At the University of Arizona, technologists are utilizing a similar social networking technology from Lifetopia to address a different challenge: room assignments.

Last year, nearly 40 percent of Tulane's 1,600 incoming freshmen used RoommateClick to find a roommate. Even students who didn't find roommate matches benefited from using the site by making new friends.

The need for this technology was simple. For years, the 5,700 University of Arizona incoming freshmen who live in the campus's 22 dorms have had the option of selecting roommates before they arrive, or accepting random roommate assignments from the Office of Residence Life. In most cases (those in which students have selected each other) these connections work just fine. In other cases (those in which Residence Life makes the matches) roommate connections can end in conflicts that Residence Life must resolve.

"Students who request to live together are far more likely to resolve their problems on their own, rather than dump on us," says Steve Gilmore, assistant director of Residence Life. "If we choose their roommate, they look to us to solve those problems."

Tired of being dragged into these battles, last year Gilmore set out to find a better way to manage roommate assignments. After investigating a number of solutions that didn't fit the bill, he discovered RoommateClick, Lifetopia's fully hosted roommate networking service that costs students \$20 per year to use.

For student users, the service essentially provides a community of potential roommates. Here's how it works: During their senior year of high school, incoming freshmen register with anonymous screen names and respond to questionnaires about everything from their hometown to study habits; personality type to sleep schedule. This information goes into profiles students later can personalize at will.

Once an incoming University of Arizona student has replied to the questionnaire, he or she has access to all of the other University of Arizona profiles in the system. In this pre-qualified community, users can meet each other, start communicating, and make connections. As they get to know each other, users then can request to connect outside the RoommateClick service (say, on other social networking websites or in person), and see if they might be compatible for a potential roommate assignment. They then apply for housing with a roommate request, eliminating the reliance on the Office of Residence Life to make a match.

"The more we can put the students in the position of making their own decisions to room together, the less likely we'll have to deal with conflicts," says Gilmore. Although Lifetopia allows him to have input into the questionnaire, Gilmore has opted to remain hands-off, in order to give students more control over the process. "At this point, it's presented to students as an option they can take advantage of if they want to," he explains. "We tell them, 'If you are interested in finding a roommate but you don't know someone already, here is a service available to you that could give you a little more control over who your roommate might be, rather than accepting a random assignment.'"

While it's still too early to tell how dramatically the service has reduced housing conflicts, there's no denying its reach: Out of 5,700 incoming freshmen,

nearly 1,000 have forked over the \$20 to sign up. A nice plus: The university has seen \$5,000 of this \$20,000 purse-- just enough to cover expenses. The rest of the money goes to the service vendor.

In Louisiana, Tulane University also has had success with this same roommate-finding website. There, Veronica Marquez, housing assignments coordinator, reports that last year nearly 40 percent of 1,600 incoming freshmen used RoommateClick to find a roommate. Marquez notes that even students who didn't find roommate matches benefited from using the site by making new friends. What's more, "At least they can say, 'I looked and I couldn't find somebody,'" she offers. "That decreases anxiety, and whenever you can decrease anxiety for students and parents, you make everyone's lives easier!"

Social Textbooking

Web 2.0-driven websites also are impacting students' access to textbooks. Here are some new student services you should know about.

-- **Chegg** This online service allows students to rent books for a substantial savings off list price (rental fees vary depending on the text), with the option to buy at the end of the rental period. Chegg also has green appeal: It plants a tree for every book rented, bought, sold, or donated. The company's affiliate program (open to all users; not just schools) encourages organizations to include Chegg banner links, text links, and search widgets on their websites; in return, Chegg kicks back 10 to 12 percent of sales driven its way.

-- **Campus Book Swap** Campus Book Swap acts as a bulletin board, helping students buy and sell used textbooks. Students post their used titles with comments and asking price. Books are sorted by school, so students see only those texts listed by others on their campus.

-- **Flat World Knowledge** Mixing tradition with innovation, this open source textbook site allows instructors to select free textbooks that are written by experts and rigorously reviewed. Educators can mix-and-match chapters or add their own materials. Students can select from a variety of formats: print, audio, bythe- chapter, and more. Flat World also offers its own community, where users can discuss the lessons, swap study notes, and learn from the book and each other.