

Fish Where the Fish Are: Higher-Ed Embraces New Communications Tools to Recruit the Wired Generation

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This study is the 4th iteration of a longitudinal look at the familiarity, usage, and attitudes towards social media at four-year accredited US colleges and universities. The results show that schools are increasingly making use of social media tools to research and recruit students and to monitor online conversation about their institutions. The findings are based on 478 interviews with college admissions officers or those handling a school's social media program. There is continued evidence of enthusiasm and eagerness to embrace these new communication tools and evidence that these powerful tools are being utilized more effectively each year.

INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt that we are more wired than ever before. Most of the population goes to sleep with their phones lying next to them and their computers not too far away. In a world where information is available at your fingertips, do we still believe that social media is just a fad? The more than 550 million active users on Facebook, half of which log in on any given day seem to say otherwise (Facebook.com/statistics2010). Today's young people as well as an increasing number of adults are utilizing Facebook, Twitter, and personal blogs, either to share their own thoughts or to read those of others. It is even possible to see a doctor online at your own convenience (Hawn, 2009).

While many researchers have studied social media usage inside an institution, not much has been done with the actual adoption of social media for marketing a school. This seems counterintuitive. Today, more schools are trying to find a way to integrate social media and new communications tools into classroom projects and lesson plans. Young people in grades K-16 have made it clear that this is how they learn best (Cramer and Hayes, 2010).

The Pew Internet Project focusing on young adults has found that as of February 2010, nearly 75% of online teens and young adults use social networking sites (Lenhart, 2010). If these tools are now integrated into their classroom experience, it becomes essential that the school they are considering is fluent in social media.

Creating a social media presence in an admissions office helps to market your school online, but also allows your target audience to know the college or university understands their lifestyle and preferences. Not having a social media presence conveys the opposite message, "This school is not for you."

With students traveling across states and countries to find a school that is right for them, a school's online presence is more important than ever. It is no longer enough just to have a website to browse, or a video of the campus. Prospective students want to speak with a person, or several people. This is one of the reasons the Edison Research Study found that Twitter had grown so fast. Awareness of Twitter has exploded from 5% of Americans in 2008 to 87% in 2010 because on Twitter people can hear what others have to say (Webster, 2010).

Students want to hear from someone like them, who has gone through the experience and can share their thoughts. Prospective students look for information about tuition, location, programs and other basic information before deciding to apply. The presentation of this information on a school's website, along with student reviews or informative videos, can make the difference in attracting prospective students.

Pew Research on Older Adults has found that, half of internet users 50-64 use social networking sites (Madden, 2010). That does not mean that academics don't matter to these students. It means professors and staff need to play a more integral role than ever. They should be communicating on blogs, and helping students learn more about what the classroom experience will be like. The online image of the school is just as important as upgrading technologies inside the campus.

The study presented here helps to fill a gap in academic research on the use of social media marketing in higher education. The data that has been collected over the past several years reveals patterns in social media usage by college admissions offices. A presence in the venue where your target audience commonly spends their time provides more familiarity, convenience and a more personal, authentic view of the school. This is the time for schools to showcase their desire to create relationships with prospective students since making connections is what this group does best.

Methodology

In the spring of 2007 a large Northeastern university conducted telephone surveys with a total of approximately 1,500 US colleges and universities in the US. That study provided the benchmark for the same study repeated in 2008 and 2009. (453 admissions officers were interviewed in 2007, 536 in 2008, and 479 in 2009). Schools were selected randomly from a comprehensive list of all four year accredited colleges and universities in the US publicly available on the University of Texas website (<http://www.utexas.edu/world/univ/>). The results of the 2009 study are presented here.

Like the 2007 and 2008 studies, the 2009 study is the result of a nationwide telephone survey of four-year accredited institutions. All interviews took place with Admissions Directors/Deans or other admissions officers in November and December 2009. The responding institutions are diverse in student size (from under 50 students to over 50,000), annual tuition (from less than \$1,000 to over \$40,000), funding (69% private, 31% public) and location (all 50 states are represented). The sample includes well-known private schools like Duke, Carnegie Mellon, Vassar and Wesleyan as well as many large state universities like the University of Arizona, University of Pennsylvania, University of Wisconsin and University of Massachusetts.

All three studies examined the familiarity with, usage of, and attitude towards social media by the admission officers at US colleges and universities. The findings presented here from the 2009 study are based on 479 interviews with a sampling error of +/- 4%. To date, this is the most comprehensive study done of American institutions of higher education and their use of social media in their admission activities.

The results continue to support what the 2007 study documented for the first time: Colleges and universities are using social media to recruit and research prospective students. It is clear that online behavior can have important consequences for young people and that social networking sites can, and will, be utilized by others to make decisions about them.

There is continued evidence of enthusiasm and eagerness to embrace these new communication tools and there is also evidence that these powerful tools are being utilized more effectively each year. Schools using social media are clearly studying the "rules of engagement" in the online world in order to maximize their effectiveness at recruiting prospective students.

Given that higher education has a culture that is simultaneously innovative and slow to change, it is important to ask how colleges and universities are responding to the new wave of social media. The research was structured to answer the following questions:

- Are colleges and universities familiar with social media?
- Are colleges and universities using social media? If so, how effectively?
- If they are not using social media, do they plan to in the future?
- Do colleges and universities consider social media important?
- Do colleges and universities use search engines and/or social networking to recruit and research prospective students?
- Do colleges and universities monitor the online discussion for mention of their school's name?

This paper compares the 2007 and 2008 data, with the 2009 data in an attempt to view changes over the past three years as schools become more familiar with social media and learn to maximize its potential.

FINDINGS

Respondents were asked to rank their familiarity with blogging, podcasting, social networking, message boards, wikis and Twitter from “very familiar” to “very unfamiliar.” Social networking, the social media that was most familiar to college admissions officers in 2007 and 2008 is still the most familiar. Familiarity with social networking has jumped from 55% reporting they were very familiar with it in 2007, to 63% in 2008 and now to 83%. Admissions officers have clearly embraced Facebook and other social networking sites as viable forms of communication with their constituency.

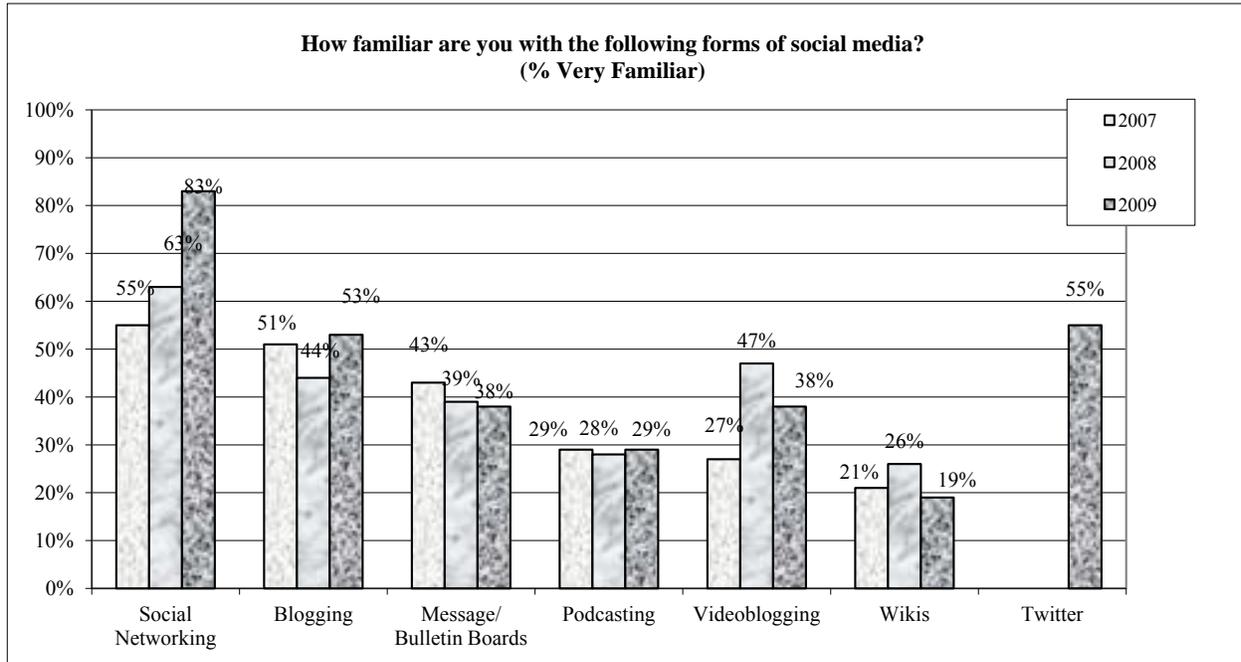
The micro-blogging site Twitter was included in this study for the first time since its use among colleges and universities (as well as businesses and non-profits) has skyrocketed. Fifty-five percent of admissions officers report they are very familiar with Twitter.

Traditional blogging also continues to be a tool that many admission offices are already “very familiar” with and many more are learning about – though not quite as quickly as social networking. Those admission officers reporting they are very familiar with blogging rose from 44% in 2008 to 55% in 2009.

In fact, as the graph below shows, a significant percentage of admissions departments are very familiar with most of the technologies studied. Even wikis -- the technology least familiar to admissions officers -- is very familiar to 19% of those surveyed. Familiarity is up strongly over the past year for social networking and blogging. It is slightly down for video blogging and wikis, while message boards and podcasting remain about the same. Notably, Twitter already has a familiarity second only to social networking.

This high level of familiarity with social media tools is, as you will see in the next section, translating into usage. The bottom line is that admissions officers are moving in the direction of becoming familiar with new tools of communication at a rapid rate, often through or in preparation for actual usage. (See Graph 1 for familiarity with various tools)

GRAPH 1



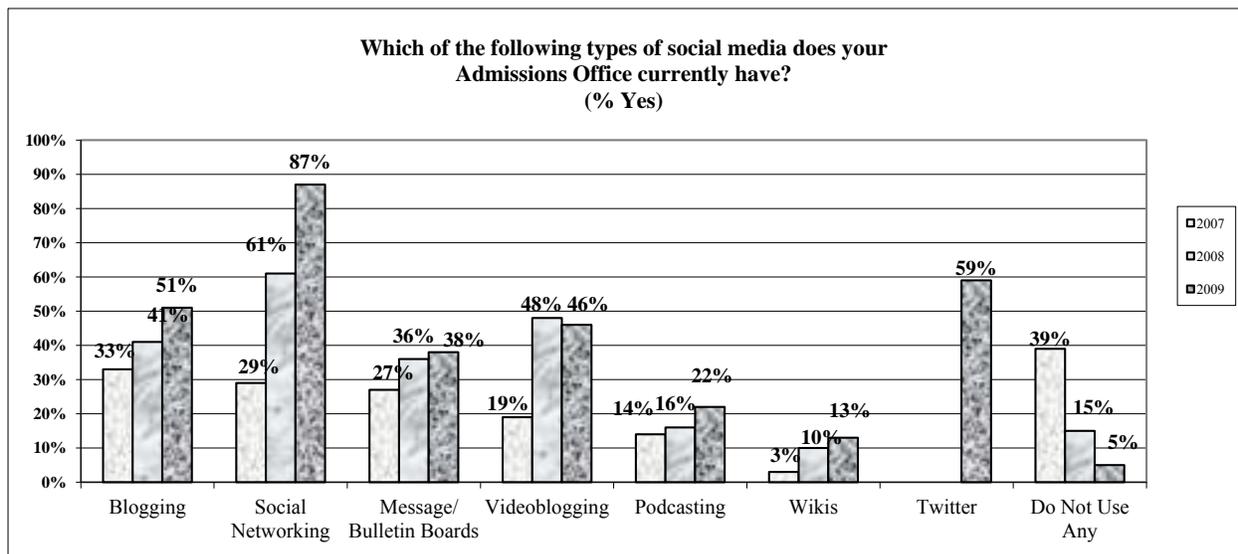
From familiarity, the survey moved into examining actual usage of social media by the admissions offices. Sixty-one percent of the respondents in 2007 reported they used at least one form of social media. One year later, 85% of college admissions offices were using at least one form of social media. In 2009 a record breaking 95% of college admissions offices use at least one form of social media. Usage is up for almost every tool studied.

Social networking is the most common form, 87% of admissions departments use it. Fifty-nine percent have a school Twitter account and 51% have a blog. Almost all of those using a blog are using other forms of social media as well. Thirty-eight percent use message boards, 22% use podcasts and 13% use wikis.

Many respondents report faculty often set up wikis for research projects and sometimes students do for group projects, but it was not one of the tools that admissions departments commonly use. (In addition to these tools, schools reported using chat rooms, instant messaging and email to reach prospective students or alumni.) (See Graph 2)

The use of social networking sites and blogging has increased dramatically. At the same time, video is still being used to deliver virtual tours of campuses, virtual visits to the dorms and sample lectures from the faculty. Twitter has stormed onto the scene and has a strong presence in the social media toolbox for admissions officers.

GRAPH 2



No significant differences were found between the use of blogs by public or private schools, or by size of undergraduate population. Fourteen percent of schools with blogs are using some internally developed applications (up 6% from 2008). Others cite WordPress (19%) and Blogger (7%) as their platforms. It is not uncommon for the admissions professional to be unfamiliar with the applications being used to host a blog (27%). At most schools, the IT department sets up the blog and the admissions office manages it. When asked who manages their blog, the most popular answers are the admissions office, marketing and public relations.

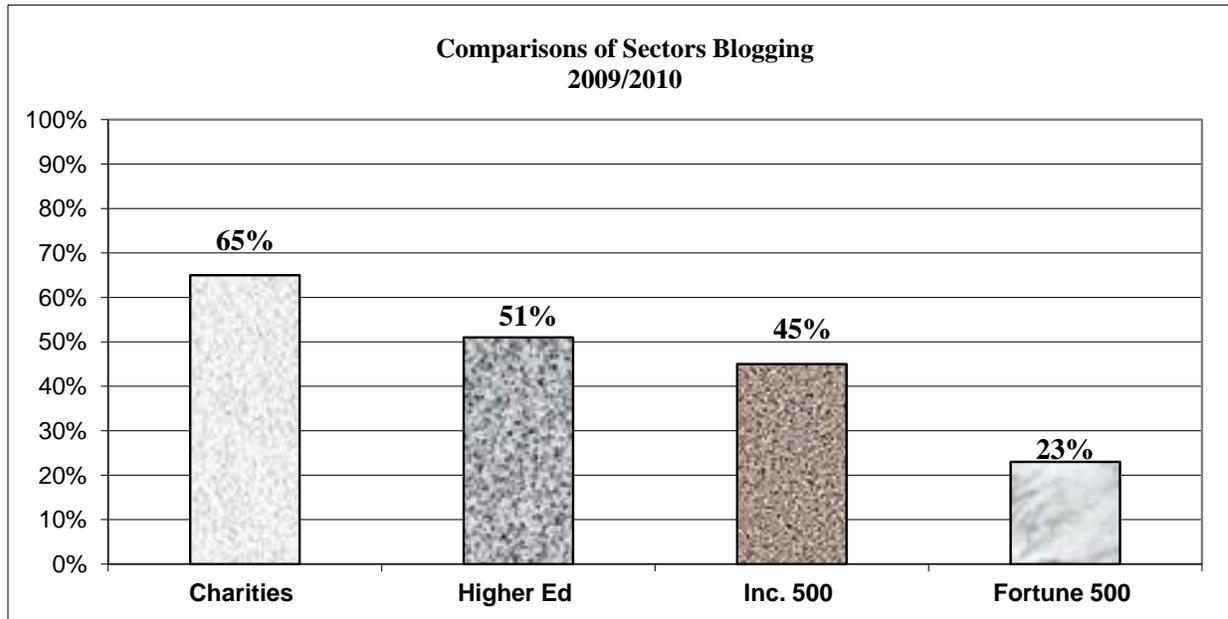
With more than half of all school reporting they have a blog, it is interesting to compare this level of adoption with other sectors. Previous research at the University of Massachusetts Center for Marketing Research indicates businesses have lower levels of adoption of this particular tool while not for profits report a higher level of blog usage. (See Graph 3)

At first glance, college admissions use of social media appears to be a case study in the timely adoption of new technology. A closer look shows consistent improvement over the past three years in critical aspects of the technology necessary to maximize the effectiveness of these tools. Comparing the 2007, 2008 and 2009 data, it becomes clear that there has been significant improvement as we look at the implementation of one popular tool, blogging.

The survey asked about blog logistics including accepting comments, promoting the blog and planning for the future of the blog. Responses from schools with blogs demonstrate how schools are learning about and using social media more effectively each year.

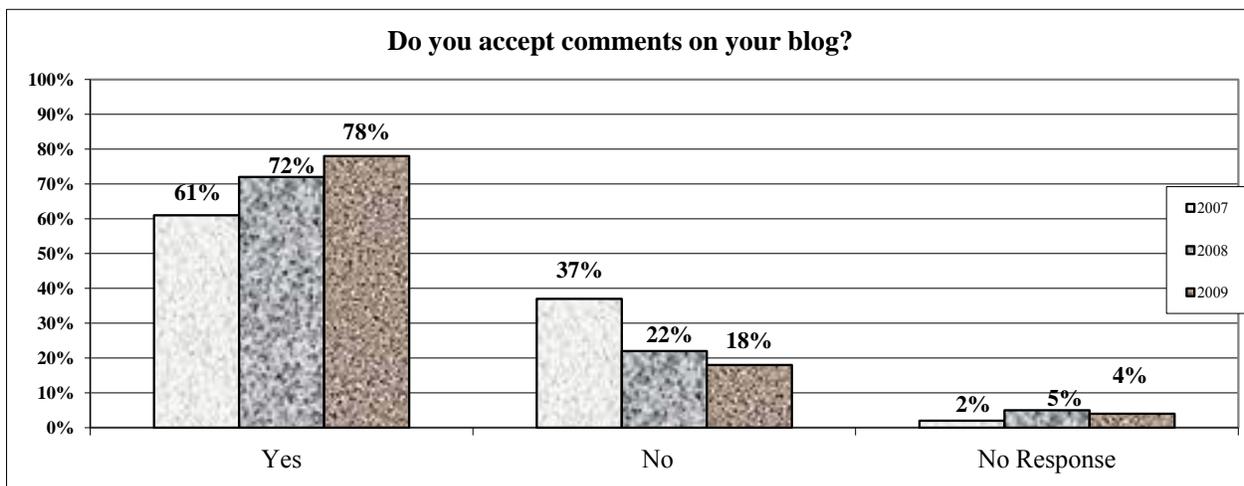
The mantra of the blogosphere is “conversation.” Blogs that do not facilitate engagement and conversation tend to lose their audience. In the 2007 study 37% of those schools with blogs did not accept comments. By any measure, this is a problem. The goal is to connect with prospective students through ongoing conversation with the school. In 2008 that figure dropped to 22%. The 2009 data shows another drop to 18%. Schools are mastering the tool and embracing its true spirit of two-way conversation.

GRAPH 3



For students or their parents looking to have a conversation online, this increased interaction through comments can be significant. With more and more schools moving into multiple channels of social media, schools that don't allow for conversation will quickly be passed by. Schools are clearly learning to use social media more effectively. (See Graph 4)

GRAPH 4



RSS feeds and other notification methods like email or text message allow ease of conversation and increases participation. This simplifies the blogosphere for readers who may want to keep up with a certain conversation or be informed of new information without having to check the blog to see if anything new has been added.

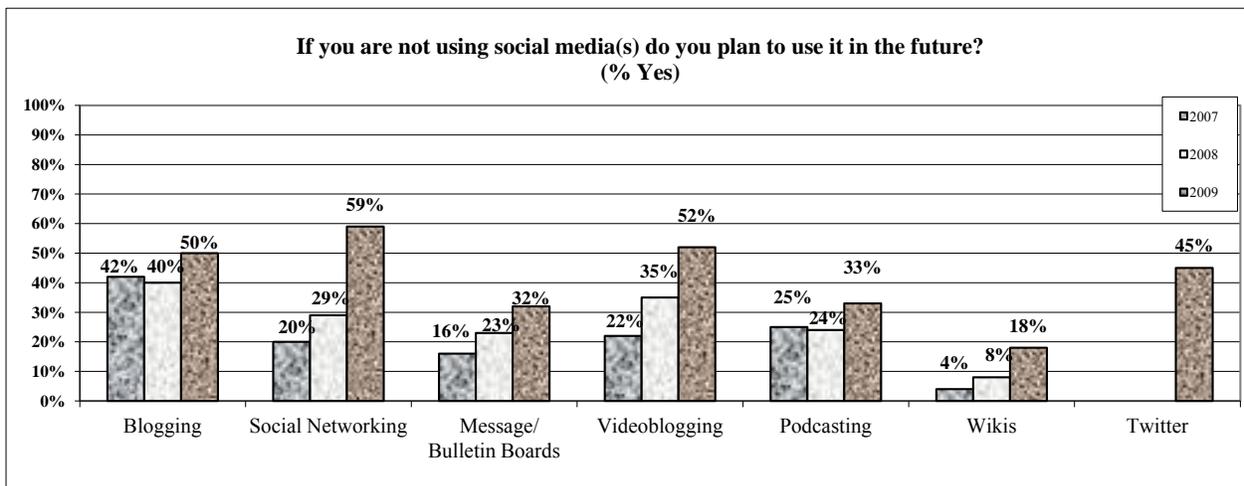
In the 2007 study, 46% of schools had an RSS feed available and 31% allowed email subscriptions. In 2008, those numbers rose to 49% and 48% respectively. In 2009, 65% were taking RSS subscriptions and 43% enabled email sign-ups for their blogs. Again, the increased use of RSS would indicate an increased sophistication in the use of blogging as a recruitment strategy.

When asked what the future plans are for the school’s blog in 2007, the most popular answer was that there are NO future plans for the blog. This was disconcerting considering the swift movement and evolution of blog technology. In the 2008 study, the most popular response was to expand the blog. Many schools began to include audio podcasts, video and live chats as part of their blog. In 2009, the most popular plan is to incorporate social media sites into blogs.

When asked if they felt their blogs were successful, 86% of schools with blogs said yes. This percentage was fairly consistent across all three studies (86%, 80%, 86%). This finding is also consistent with studies in business that have shown those using social media are satisfied with it and feel it provides positive results.

Those schools not currently using social media, or a particular tool, were asked if they planned to in the future. Fifty-nine percent plan to add social networking to their current media channels. Fifty-two percent plan to make increased use of video on their blogs and 50% of those without blogs, plan to add them. (See Graph 5)

GRAPH 5



The adoption of social media by admissions departments is being driven by familiarity and their recognition of the increasingly important role of social media in today’s world. Interestingly, more admissions departments feel that social media is “very important” to their future strategy than Inc. 500 businesses, (50% compared to 43%). Even more powerfully, it is worth noting that 91% of admissions departments feel that social media is at least “somewhat important” to their future strategy (See Graph 6). There is a significant correlation between perceived importance of social media technologies and use of Facebook. Those that are convinced of the need to utilize these tools do have a presence on internet social networking sites. (See Table 1)

GRAPH 6

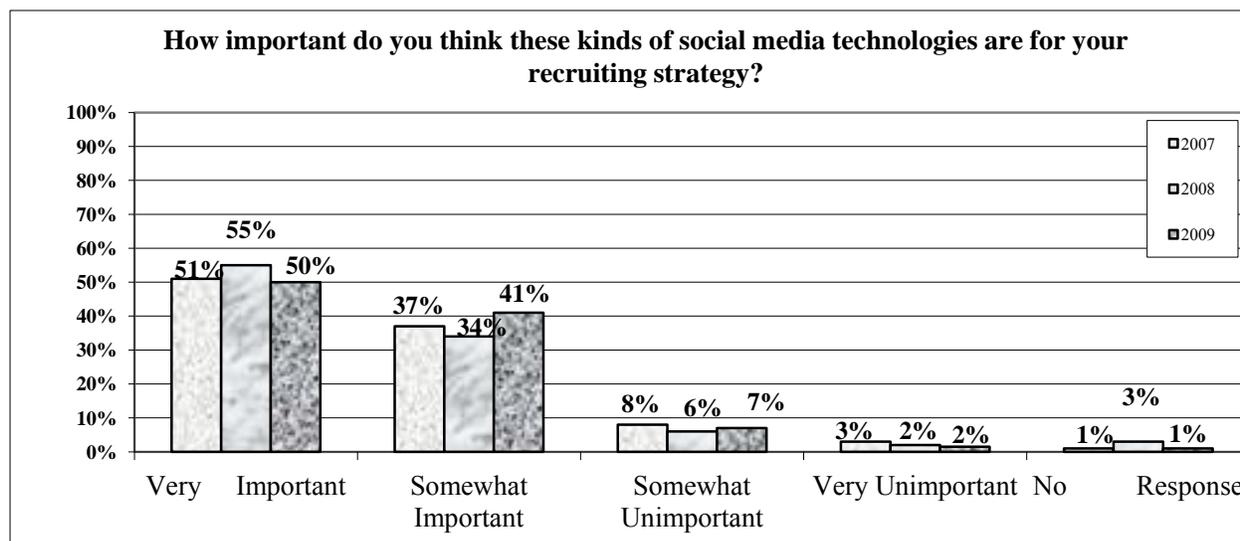


TABLE 1
PERCEIVED IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA WITH USE OF FACEBOOK

		Use of Social Media
Perceived Importance of Social Media for Marketing Strategy	Spearman's rho	.301
	Sig. (2 tail)	.000*
	N	478

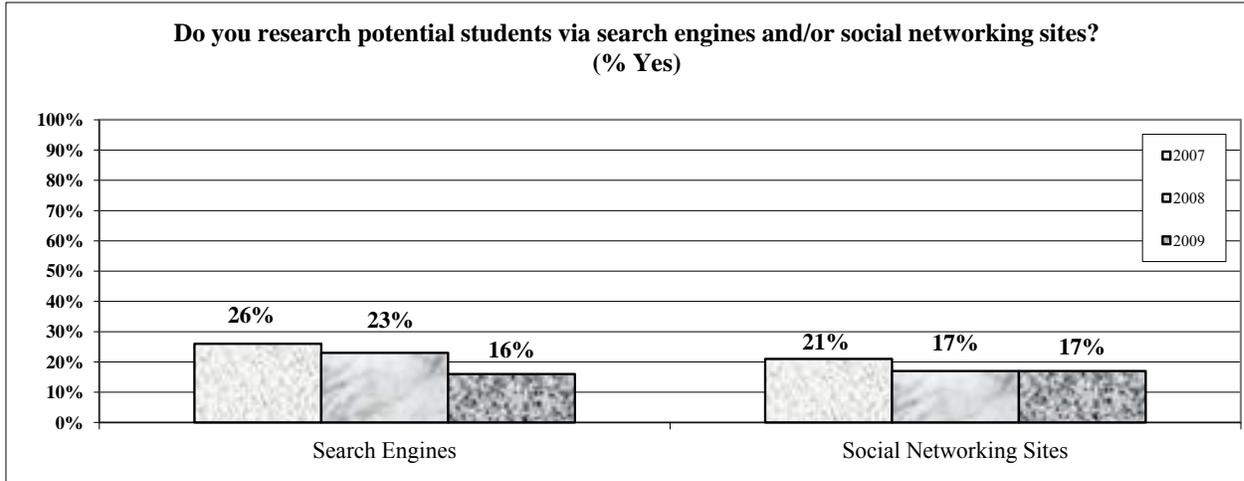
*Significant at the .000

A significant proportion of schools continue to research students via search engines (16%) and social networks (17%). While these numbers are the same for social networking as they were last year, fewer schools are reporting the use of search engines in their recruiting strategy. In 2007, 26% reported using Google or Yahoo, in 2008 that number dropped to 23%. There seems to be a preference for information from social networking sites.

The admissions officers interviewed for this study reported using search engines and social networking sites to verify information, research students who were candidates for scholarships, or for those seeking entry into high-demand programs with limited spaces. In all these cases the intent was to protect the school. No school wants to announce the winner of a prestigious scholarship only to have compromising pictures discovered on the internet the next day. There were no reports of checking every applicant to an institution, no matter how small the school. Online research appears to be more of a precaution at this point or a source of additional information for critical decision making.

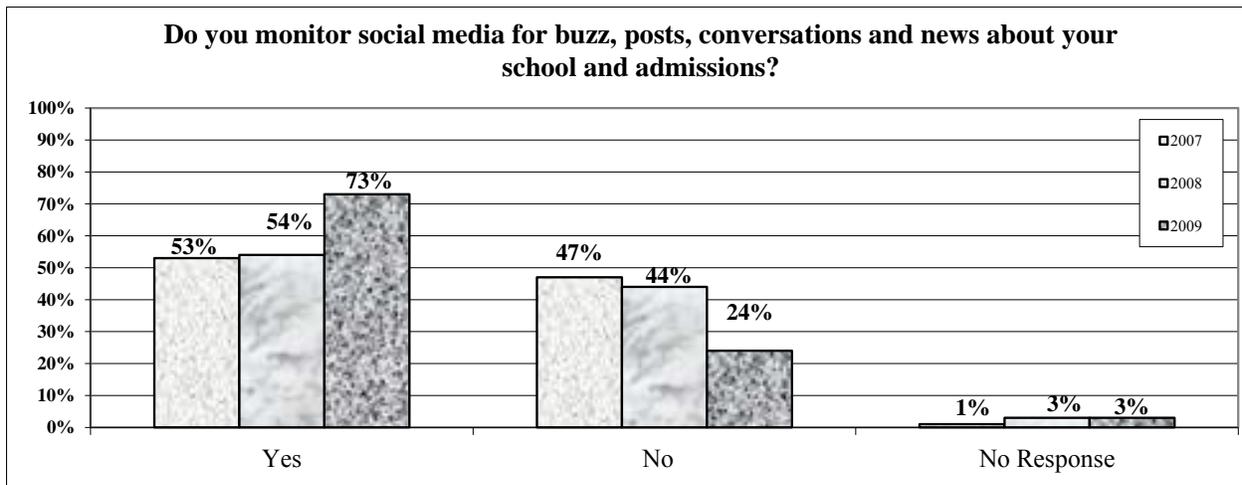
The search engines used most often are Google and Yahoo while the social networking sites include Facebook and MySpace. The value of these social networking sites for college admissions offices cannot be underestimated. As more and more young people spend increased amounts of time on these online networks, an institutional presence will be mandatory (See Graph 7).

GRAPH 7



It is clear that admissions offices are now communicating in new ways. The next question is: Are they listening to what's being said about their school online? Fifty-three percent in 2007 and 54% in 2008 report they monitored the internet for buzz, posts, conversations and news about their institution. Our latest research shows an increase of close to 20% with 73% of schools now monitoring their school name. Given the ease with which monitoring can be done, it is not surprising that many of the institutions studied are now doing it. (See Graph 8)

GRAPH 8



Over half of the institutions monitoring social media reported doing so manually. Most were using simple Google searches using the name of their school. Those schools that monitor online activity as it relates to them, tend to be private schools. They tend to be users of all forms of social media including blogs, podcasting and video. These schools are also more likely to research students online via social networking sites.

Perceived importance of social media to the school, does translate into monitoring behavior. Those schools with a culture where online communications are respected as having value are more likely to fully embrace that activity. They are gathering critical strategic information by listening to what is being said about their institutions and their competitors in the social media world.

A social media policy outlines for employees (or students) the guidelines or principles of communicating in the online world. When employees or student interns post on Facebook, Twitter or the school's blog, they have a responsibility to represent the school both honestly and within the school's rules or code of conduct. There are many examples of schools with such policies (see especially DePaul, University of Texas-Austin, George Mason and Kansas State).

One cautionary note relates to having a blogging or social media policy that defines what is acceptable via the institutions' online communications. Thirty-two percent of schools have such a policy in place for their employees or students who engage in online conversations as it relates to the school. Social media policies are now seen as important elements as an institution develops their social media strategy. Less than 25% of the Fortune 500 companies currently have social media policies in place even though many companies have hundreds of employees that utilize blogging, Twitter or Facebook on a regular basis. Few schools have developed such a policy.

In this study, 32% of admissions directors interviewed reported having a written social media policy. Previous research (Barnes and Mattson, 2009) with businesses finds 36% of the Inc. 500 (small, fast growing businesses) and 21% of the Fortune 500 (wealthiest companies) have written social media policies. Higher education, like businesses in the US, are still learning how to use and direct the use of these new tools.

IMPLICATIONS

It is clear from this study that colleges and universities are moving quickly to adopt new communications tools. This movement combines thought on brand awareness, technology adoption, communications, advertising and other areas of Marketing yet no distinct work in academia on social media adoption for recruiting has appeared. This study comes more as a statistical report from which new assumptions may be posited. It is an attempt to define a new perspective or paradigm of how institutions communicate.

There are associations in the data which show that familiarity with new communications tools is related to their implementation the more an admissions officer sees social media tools as important for strategic communications, the more likely they are to participate in social media. These advocates are also reporting high levels of success.

Further research is necessary to address how social media can create or support strong brand awareness for academic institutions. Also, work is needed on how these new tools fit into a marketing plan and how their implementation might be most effective across diverse school demographics, especially in targeting specific subgroups for recruitment.

Finally, students should be queried in an effort to match their communications preferences with the channels being used by colleges and universities. Just as marketers have long looked to satisfy consumer preferences, social media provides an opportunity for academia to relate to its "customers" in the way they are most comfortable. More research is necessary to better understand the effectiveness of social media as part of the marketing strategy in college admissions.

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