

## Leveraging the Facebook phenomenon in Education Communities

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### Overview

The meteoric rise of social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace has excited the interest of affinity marketing professionals with the prospect of marketing products, services and causes to these rapidly growing, highly targetable user bases. However, our research indicates this opportunity should be approached with guarded enthusiasm – especially when targeting audiences outside the core 18-25 year old demographic that has epitomized the adoption of these products. Further it is by no means the panacea for engaging an audience.

As we began our analysis we discovered a need to categorize online communities. We recognized two distinct types, General and Common Interest Communities, and defined these categories as:

General Interest Communities are self-organizing, organic and transient groups, loosely connected through shifting and changing interests. Within these communities, members freely join, unilaterally create their profile, and then begin their search for connections with other members. site administration is more focused on member management than on group management. Some examples would include Facebook, MySpace, Bebo, Friendster and hi5, just to name a few.

Common Interest Communities are deterministic groups, specifically organized around a specific interest and often initiated by an offline relationship between members. More often than not, members are initially subscribed to the community by its organizer. Examples include faith-based organizations, member-based associations, and alumni organizations. These sites can be hosted by public, ad-supported platforms; third party solutions like iModules; or by custom built, in-house solutions.

When developing an online strategy, marketing professionals need to consider the differences aspects between these two types of online communities. This paper will discuss the dynamics of online communities along the following dimensions:

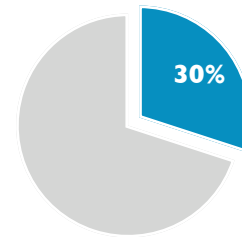
- Data Integrity: Scrutinizing the validity of content submitted through communities
- Demographics: Comparing the demographics of communities to target audiences.
- Reporting: Understanding the activity of a community.
- Longevity: Building competencies that are sustainable.
- Administration: Managing behaviors in communities.
- Context & Branding: Programming and offers should consider their context.
- Scale: By their inherent nature, general interest communities offer access to large audiences.

This paper will conclude with a list of recommendations to education marketing professionals on how to leverage the activity on general interest online communities. An epilogue includes results from tests we have performed using Facebook Social Ads to target collegiate alumni.

## Data Integrity

Market research firm Forrester notes that as much as a third of all data in public social networking sites is inaccurate<sup>1</sup>. Given the context of how members are subscribed, especially in general interest communities, users are able to create their own online identity. This gives them the freedom to report their information as accurately or inaccurately as they please. Using the Facebook Social Ad Manager to research data integrity on Facebook, we discovered that of the 4.1 million 13-17 year old users in the U.S., just over 220,000 of them claim to be married. And surprisingly over 7,000 are also college graduates. While we were unable to find documentation to refute this information, anecdotally it is difficult to believe 5.4% of US teens using Facebook are married.

When users create their Facebook identity, they can enter absolutely any data they wish for their profile, or the page that describes themselves to the community. This means they can falsely report their age, marital status, gender, home town, interests, school, education, workplace and so on. This is a real nightmare for marketers who plan to use these sites to accurately target audiences for offers and advertisements. Unless using other mechanisms outside of these sites, marketers have absolutely no way to validate they are reaching their target audience.



Percentage of inaccurate content on general interest communities

Common interest groups have a similar, yet mitigated, risk. Most users of common interest online communities have a pre-existing offline relationship with the host of the community. In the education market, alumni associations have a tangible connection, one built on historical trust between the association and the member. This connection, where reputation is key, increases the personal risk of falsifying self-reported data in the association's online community. In addition to the user-generated content of such a community, an alumni association will always be able to validate and augment this content since it collects alumni information such as graduation date, age, and more through its offline relationship with members.

Community managers should carefully consider the data integrity ramifications of directly, or even indirectly, tying common interest communities or master database systems to content collected from general interest communities. Given our research, we would strongly recommend never directly tying these data sets together. Additionally, caution should be used when considering advertising on general interest communities, even those that offer tight segmentation opportunities.

And lastly, community managers should become accustomed to the dynamics of their target segments and their propensity to use profile and user-generated content in a way that negatively affects the results of online campaigns. For instance, in the above example of teens claiming to be married, "being married" would be akin to "in a serious relationship." Knowing this can allow marketing professionals to adjust their strategy to accommodate these nuances. That said, there is also evidence of pure prankster data integrity issues such as a teen whose hometown is "Sadly, Kansas". No, there is no such town.

## Demographics

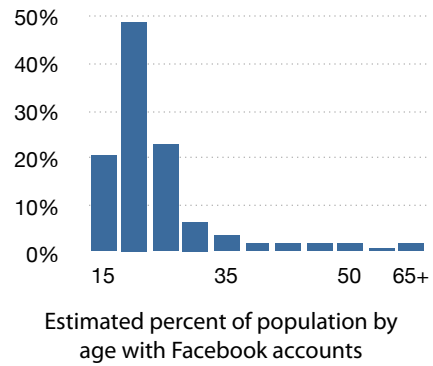
Despite the incredible growth of tools like Facebook, general interest communities do not reflect the overall demographics of a population; and this is especially true when considering the goals of many affinity marketing efforts in the education market. This, along with a recent Forrester Research report noting that less than 70% of adults visit social networking sites monthly, means that while web-based social networking sites have traction with the youth market, their appeal hasn't excited the overall mainstream market.

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<sup>1</sup> "The Many Challenges of Social Networking Sites", web-strategist.com, February 2008.

Again using the leading site Facebook as an example, we compared the self-reported age of Facebook users with the broader US demographic (see chart). Using U.S. Census figures and information available on Facebook's Ad Manager, we found nearly 50% of 18-24 year olds in the U.S. have a Facebook account, while only 1.1% of those over the age of 34 have one. This lopsided penetration can be attributed to the company's launch strategy of initially limiting account creation to .edu e-mail domains. Regardless, this community does not currently appeal to or represent the broader mainstream.

Additional analysis shows demographic inconsistencies when comparing a member's self-reported state of residence. When comparing U.S. Census data for the 13-17 year old segment and information found on Facebook, we found that 40% of Kansans in this age group have accounts, while only 9% of California teens do. This would mean on a per-capita basis, Kansas teens are 4x more likely to have a Facebook account compared to their peers in the Golden State. While outside the scope of this report, it would be interesting to discover which state's teens have the highest subscription percentage to Facebook.



While more general interest communities are providing views into their membership records, community professionals should also seek to know the account abandonment rate on these systems. It is common for individuals to set up an account on a general interest community and following their initial use, abandon the account; however, the account with its self-reported and contributed content remain on the site, thus potentially misreporting the number of users in a segment. This behavior is also common when a member wishes to create a new account on the same site to "start a new identity." General interest community sites rely heavily on member-to-member connections, and over time, users can develop "friend list fatigue", in which their account includes too many, or more often too many undesirable, friends associated with one account. The easiest and most socially acceptable way to fix this problem is to simply create a new account and start anew. The net result of this action is further inaccuracy in overstating the community membership and reported demographics.

It would seem prudent for marketing professionals to first determine the segment they wish to market their product, service or cause to prior to developing a strategy heavily or solely focused on general interest community marketing initiative.

## Reporting

As discussed earlier, general interest communities allow members to organically create accounts and profiles at no cost, lest the time investment. When operating in general interest sites, marketers have little to no administrative functions to report, research, and analyze a target audience, their actions, and intentions.

While rudimentary information can sometimes be gleaned from profile data, deep, aggregated data about an audience is virtually inaccessible. To monitor the health and success of a community, statistics about user behavior is invaluable. By integrating e-mail offers, hosted pages, forms processing and the ability to analyze click-throughs, page views, form completions and abandonment metrics, owner-hosted common interest communities can continuously adjust their strategies to meet the organic trends of the market. And of course, greater data insight leads to continuous improvement in marketing effectiveness for future campaigns.

Some information is simply not available to marketers on general interest communities. For example, how many members viewed a particular page or offer? How many members in a target market have logged in

this month? When was the last time they logged in, and when did they last update their profile? What percentage of them opened a message, and did they click on the link?

### *Reporting Capabilities of Communities*

	<b>General Interest</b>	<b>Hosted-Common Interest</b>
<b>Member Information</b>		
Login information	Anecdotal	Most recent and historical
Access to user-generated content	Managed by member	Complete
Profile page visits	None	Complete
Content Updates	Limited	Complete
Social graph access	Managed by member	Complete
<b>Community</b>		
Unique visitors to an offer or page	None	Complete
Offer or page abandonment rates	None	Complete
Aggregate community demographics	Very Limited	Complete
Aggregate community statistics	Very Limited	Complete

Given the relative cost to reach large audiences, marketing professionals may discount the need for thorough reporting capabilities when executing online campaigns; however, continuously analyzing the effectiveness of any campaign, off or online, is considered to be a best practice. It can be argued that knowing the reasons some elect not to respond to an offer can be more important information than the information about those who did respond when crafting the next campaign.

Professionals should expect very different traffic patterns between general and common interest communities. Our findings would encourage temporal analysis over domain comparisons: monitor key performance indicators over time as opposed to comparing metrics between differing communities.

### **Longevity**

Some might find it surprising, but the appeal of social networking is not only universal it is also not new. Certainly the nuances and features of today's more popular sites might seem fresh, but the online manifestation of social networking is at the core of our online experience.

There is already a long list of "the most popular social networking sites", which have caught the market's admiration over the past decade. Here in the US, beginning with GeoCities and continuing through a list that would include classmates.com and friendster, MySpace and Facebook are now the segment leaders. While servicing a slightly different, sites like LinkedIn and Plaxo can also be included as initiatives targeted at connecting people online.

The market's whims are transient and today's most popular site may not be relevant next year. Building an affinity marketing strategy solely tied to any general interest community ties your long-term success with that particular community. Your knowledge, expertise, best practices, development and the like may not be transferrable for your efforts on "the next big thing". It also bears mentioning that even if skills are transferrable, we do not know of a general interest community, historical or otherwise, that allows you to collect your aggregate, personal and behavior member data and take it with you, forcing professionals with the difficult realization that it must be abandoned.

## **Administration**

Similar to the benefits found with reporting, owner-hosted common interest communities offer more management features than general interest ones. In the end, running campaigns on general interest sites leaves professionals exposed to various challenges and risks.

The most obvious limitation to using general interest communities is that a third party unilaterally manages User Administration. This means the terms of use and their enforcement (or lack thereof) is outside the control of community managers and is in the control of site administrators. Flagging and handling inappropriate content and behavior in the community is also owned by a third party. Standards of inappropriateness vary drastically among populations and in owner-hosted common interest communities, institutions can determine what is appropriate and not appropriate for their audience. One must exercise balance regardless of ownership to not seem too heavy or light handed in dealing with the content issue.

Brand ownership is also of interest. Institutions invest heavily to ensure a consistently and favorably executed brand. This branding extends to the overall design of a site, iconography, imagery and features presented to visitors of a community. General interest communities provide users essentially no control of the branding of the content presented on a site; for the focus of the brand is on the host of the community, not the participants in it.

Immediately following the issue of branding is advertising. In-line advertising, particularly ads served by non-owner-hosted communities, pose additional challenges for community managers. In fact, an advertisement or offer for any conceivable product or service could appear to members of a community. Often times, institutions have pre-existing off-line trade agreements with vendors or code of ethics requirements to control what products they care to see associated with their institution. In general interest communities, professionals have no control over this issue. In owner-hosted common interest communities, managers have full control over this dynamic.

And lastly, general interest communities typically have a narrow feature set designed for page/event administration. Every event has its own nuances, and by design, general interest sites usually only allow the simplest of configurations for event organizers. And of course, there is virtually no way to systematically import or export large numbers of members and their respective profile data from general interest communities.

## **Context & Scale**

More often than not, members visit general interest communities for a daily diversion and to network with friends. When someone visits a common interest community, simply due to its singular focus, they have a specific expectation about what type of content and offers will be available. While certainly a subtle aspect in the success of a campaign, marketing professionals should consider the context in which an offer will be presented to someone in a target audience. What will the disposition be of the visitor to a page when they encounter an offer? Will they find the placement offensive and ill-suited to the context of visit to the site?

By their inherent nature, general interest communities offer access to large audiences for they appeal to any and everyone in certain demographics. Also, since many general interest communities' most valued performance indicators are page views and unique logins, their primary goal is traffic, not necessarily affinity for any particular institution or cause. So while monitoring high-level traffic data about a site is important, for common interest communities the real measurement is increased affinity for the institution.

## Strategies for Using General Interest Communities

Up to this point the reader may infer that our studies have shown marketing through general interest communities is not worthwhile. This view would be incorrect. We believe leveraging these communities as part of an overall marketing effort to reach audiences in these segments is a rather savvy strategy. Some of the tactics we would enthusiastically suggest for marketing professionals looking to reach 18-25 year olds would include:

- Carefully understand your audience demographics and that of the community
- Set up an account for your organization
- Create a “page” with links back to your site
- Establish your own “group” branded for your institution
- Join related groups to network and monitor activity
- Create events to promote your off-network events
- Experiment with advertising opportunities in the community
- Relentlessly monitor groups and pages that incorporate your brand or institution

These tactics are likely to increase the effectiveness of your overall marketing effort to reach your younger target audience. In fact, your greatest risk is to simply ignore the growing popularity of general interest communities in your planning. Understanding the opportunities and limitations of general interest online communities provides marketing professionals additional avenues to promote their campaigns. Augmented with an owner-hosted online community, institutions can realize the greatest benefits of both technologies.

## Epilogue - A Social Ads Experiment

Recently, in conjunction with five universities, we conducted a small study on the effectiveness of using Facebook Social Ads to generate traffic for their hosted sites outside of Facebook. We think this experiment confirmed that (1) Facebook social ads offer an affordable, low-effort way to publicize university-sponsored sites to a highly targeted audience, (2) traffic driven from these ads was modest at best, but as part of a long-term effort would be expected to deliver increased awareness, and (3) the impact of sites like Facebook will only continue to increase over time.

Before we started the test we compared each institutions' own database to what could be collected from Facebook. Comparing only aggregate raw numbers, interestingly no institution in our test showed over 9% of their alumni base on Facebook, and one was as low as 3%. When comparing the undergraduate numbers we noticed more consistency with institutional reports; however, there was one exception where nearly 6,000 Facebook users claimed to be a student of a college that only enrolls 3,450.

Over a one week period we placed social ads for five different universities of both modest and larger alumni bases. These ads were targeted to run only for graduates of the respective institutions and included a rather passive call to action to "check out what's happening" at their alma mater. We believe the results would have been different, and likely more impressive, if the call to action was for a specific event or program with a deadline. This noted, we wanted to test for a base-line impact of using this advertising technique.

Creating, choosing the target audience, and configuring a social ad on Facebook is straightforward. There are occasional user-interface nuances and attempting to report on concurrent ads can be confusing. Setting budgets and monitoring the impact of ads is simple. All told, it took us less than 15 minutes to get an ad online targeted at a very tight group of graduates.

We chose to "pay by impression", set our budget for \$20 per day and took the lowest "pay per 1,000 impressions" price for each institution since, each was slightly different but none exceeded 38 cents. We understood that given our low budget commitment the ads would not likely appear in every Facebook session.

During the test across all five institutions we consistently saw "impression traffic" at a rate of approximately 5x the size of the target audience. For instance one of the larger participating institutions had 13,300 alumni with Facebook accounts. Over the one week test, the ad had 58,605 impressions, collected 28 click-throughs, and cost \$14.62 over the campaign period. On an annualized basis we would predict over 1.5 million impressions, and nearly 1,500 clicks for a cost of less than \$500. As part of an overall marketing budget, we would view this as a cost efficient marketing plan – if only for the awareness building aspects of such an effort.

It should be noted that at all the five institutions we partnered with on this experiment, the undergraduate population on Facebook exceeded that of its graduates, further confirming this community's reach into the youth market.

<i>Institution</i>	<i>Impressions</i>	<i>Clicks</i>	<i>Click Rate</i>	<i>Cost</i>	<i>Cost/Click</i>	<i>Students</i>	<i>Alumni Base</i>	
							<i>Facebook</i>	<i>Actual</i>
University #1	58,605	28	0.05%	\$14.82	\$0.52	19,750	13,300	160,200
University #2	57,811	46	0.08%	\$14.57	\$0.32	16,250	10,280	159,000
College #1	21,748	21	0.10%	\$5.76	\$0.27	7,500	4,300	49,500
College #2	11,370	35	0.31%	\$2.70	\$0.08	5,850	2,280	69,175
College #3	9,656	10	0.10%	\$2.39	\$0.24	2,500	2,060	31,500
Average	31,838	28	0.13%	\$8.05	\$0.29			
Annualized	1,655,576	1,456		\$418.50				