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Last Updated (Wednesday, 10 November 2010 4:21:21 pm EST)

Always Online

College campuses have always been places where new technology is developed and embraced, so it should come as no surprise that today's students are on the forefront of anything new. In the Internet Age, that means that any new developments are occurring online. A quick look at any campus will show you students that can get online from almost anywhere thanks to smart phones and, increasingly, wireless Internet clouds that are turning entire sections of campus into mobile hotspots. With more and more of students' time being spent online, off-campus student housing providers have developed several effective ways to market to potential residents.

Marketing to students by way of their mobile phones has become one of the most popular ways to reach students. IRIO Mobile Marketing creates campaigns that use short messaging service (SMS), also called text messaging, for many of the largest student housing managers in the country. The company's client list includes Asset Campus Housing, Campus Apartments and Education Realty Trust. IRIO has developed "text to win" promotional campaigns as well as keyword advertising, in which students send a text message to a keyword that provides more information on the property.

"SMS is a great way to get them on their phones where you want them to go," says John Bower, director of business development for IRIO. "It's pretty brilliant, because you're getting one of the most personal and private things, which is a person's cell phone number."



IRIO also has the ability to create websites for individual properties including mobile websites that are optimized to be viewed on smart phones. IRIO has a template for the site that companies work from, and the template can be customized in a variety of ways for clients.

"We actually have been approached by people who simply wanted to use our mobile Internet site for their properties, as opposed to hiring a [web] developer," Bower says.

G5 Search Marketing is another company that specializes in marketing to students. Its focus is on using a community's website as well as social media sites to drive leads to the property. The company's offerings begin with creating a website for the property, which it recently completed for North 38 Apartments near James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Virginia, and Collegiate Station at Ruston, a community in Ruston, Louisiana, that is located near Louisiana Tech and Grambling State universities. While creating the website, G5 utilizes search engine optimization and search engine marketing to make sure it is as high as possible on search engine results. With social media sites currently dominating popular culture, G5 also creates links to share the website on places like Facebook and Twitter. It also makes sure the Facebook pages for the communities have easy ways to refer students to the community.

"We see social media as an opportunity to turn residents into your sales force — it's a word-of-mouth tool," says Amanda Patterson, marketing and communications manager for G5.

Once a student has signed a lease, he or she still needs access to information about the community. Companies such as Residential Management Systems (RMS) have found a way to effectively get this information to students harnessing the capabilities of smart phones. The company's campusM for Students software provides university information to students from an easy to use mobile application.

"[campusM for Students] was basically driven out of the need for more and more students asking for more and more access to information on their mobile devices," says Andrew Tanner, vice president of sales for RMS.

Schools can customize the type of information available to their students as well as the look of the app. A list of available options includes school alerts, news and a real-time calendar of things such as upcoming lectures, book availability in libraries and even open computers in labs. The program can also provide connections to others using the app including classmates and professors.

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"Everything is at their fingertips now," Tanner says. "We're all using our phones to do a lot more. So, having that ability to have access to information immediately from wherever you are — sitting in a café or walking to class — it's a huge benefit for them."

campusM for Students is currently used by 15 schools in the United Kingdom, but RMS is launching the app in the United States. It also has a variation of campusM for Students, which it calls campusM for Housing, which is a more specialized version of the software that can provide information specifically for on-campus housing residents.

Student housing managers are taking notice of the new ways in which students are using the Internet. Included among Campus Advantage's roster of student employees are social media coordinators, which update the Facebook pages and Twitter feeds for their respective properties.



"One of the advantages of working with students is that you have a built-in focus group at all times," says Dan Oltersdorf, vice president of residence life for Campus Advantage.

In addition to maintaining the main Facebook pages for its properties, Campus Advantage posts upcoming community events. This past August, it had a National Move-In Day, which it coordinated through all of its property pages. According to Casey Van Zandt, vice president of leasing and marketing for Campus Advantage, the number of "Likes" clicked on for the company's Facebook page increased by 25 percent in the 2 weeks immediately following the event.

"Our goal is to capture interactivity as well as participation on [our] sites. So, our insights report

on Facebook has just changed night and day from before, when we started our social media committee, to now, in which we are seeing good results," Van Zandt says.

"The one thing you have to remember when you're making choices about this [methods of communicating with students] is you're not a student," says Andrew Marshall, senior vice president and chief information officer for Campus Apartments. "You really have to keep on top of not only what the current methods and channels are, but also what people want to use in the demographic that you're servicing, which is different in undergraduate or post-graduate."

Marshall also points out that students are not the only people student housing providers are communicating with; this list also include parents and other adults that assist in making housing decisions. Because of this, Marshall says that one must keep a variety of communication channels open in order to effectively reach out to all of these groups. Once a student is a resident, the nature of how they deal with the property manager changes, but the methods of communication still need to appeal to them.

"We have resident portals, so they can log in, access resident resources, pay online, submit and check on the status of work orders, and contact the front office," Oltersdorf says. "They want to be able to do all of that instantly. Not only do they not want to wait for an email to come back, but they want to be able to do it without going back to their rooms."

Colleges and universities are already working to alter their operations to cater to today's student, who wants 24-hour access from any location at his or her convenience. Student housing providers are similarly altering how they operate to reflect this.

"It's no good telling students, 'If you want to do this, you have to come into the leasing office between 9 and 6.' Everyone is used to being able to go to the website, doing whatever they want, and maybe not even interacting with a person," Marshall says.

Predicting the future of student housing can be hard, but predicting what technologies will play into that and how they will do so is asking for trouble. Marshall likens it to the job of a venture capitalist, who invests in a number of projects knowing only a handful will succeed. He says that with new technologies, you have to accept the fact that six months down the road only one in three new technologies will actually be adopted.

"When you do my job, you have to be prepared for anything to change at any time," Marshall says. "There is no area that is off limits, that's not going to change, and you have to maintain an organization, an attitude and an outlook that is flexible."

At this point, though, it seems a safe bet that mobile phones are here to stay and are only going to increase in popularity and capability.

"I honestly think that we're going to do more and more on our phones," says Tanner. "Every three to four months there is a new phone that does more and more. Very, very quickly we're going to see a dramatic move to handheld-based communications." Tanner echoes something that RMS is already addressing with its campusM app — that students will begin to access social media as well as school information through their phones, and they will be looking for everything from ways to contact their friends to setting up schedules and meetings with professors and counselors.

Marketing companies are also looking at applications within existing programs such as Facebook. Many have their eye on location applications such as Foursquare and Facebook Places, which are popular with students but have not been effectively harnessed by marketers yet. No matter what becomes popular tomorrow, it is important to communicate with students with the technology they are using today. Flexibility and adaptation are the keys to reaching students through new technology.

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