

Blockbuster Marketing for Campus Events

by Del Suggs

There is one common challenge faced by Student Activities personnel everywhere: Attendance. I hear it from campus after campus, the same question-- "how do I get more students at my events?" In today's climate of shrinking budgets and accountability, it is even more important to increase participation and engagement at your events.

Let me share some promotional concepts and suggestions with you that will increase your attendance. These are ideas that I practice myself, and ideas I've seen used at campuses across the country.

First: The Basics

It's important to remember that, like you, your students also have outside lives. Particularly today, when we see more non-traditional students than ever on campus, it's important to cater to their needs and schedules more than ever. Here are some basic suggestions to improve your attendance.

Do your programs when the students are on campus. That means if you're a commuter campus, do your programs during the daytime. It is the rare school with commuter students who will return at night to attend an event. Do the event when students are already on campus.

Likewise, do your programs where your students congregate. I'll bet you could have Dave Matthews performing in your campus auditorium, and the students wouldn't walk over from the cafeteria or student center to hear him. Okay, that might be a bad example. But, seriously, try presenting your programs where they spend their leisure time. If you can't bring them to the show, take the show to them!

Finally, understand traffic patterns. If you're a campus where students mostly walk from the parking lot to the classroom and back to the parking lot,

use that to your advantage. Present an event in between the parking lot and the classroom and capture those students. Don't bother trying to break those patterns. It's easier to utilize them!

Second: High Tech

Here is my basic disclaimer about high tech promotional techniques: always remember that the most effective means of promotion is "word-of-mouth." That means good, old fashion person-to-person asking students to attend. That means that you tell ten students to come, and they each tell ten students to come. Word-of-mouth works, because there is an implicit endorsement. When YOU invite ME, I know it will be a good event because I know you (and you're cool!).

Still we all want that magic website or high tech toy where we can push a button and pack the house. It doesn't exist. Still, there are some high tech means of promoting your programs. They can be very successful, when used in addition to other methods.

Yea, Facebook!

We all have a Facebook profile. And you know all of your students do, too.

Your CAB should have a Facebook page. That's all you need. You can invite your Facebook friends to become fans. That gives you multiple ways to stay in touch with your students, and promote your events and programs.

Create Facebook Events, and promote them with your friends. It really does spread the word and get the message out there.

Doing that Texting Thing

Everybody is Texting. There are a number of ways you can use texting to promote your events.

Your campus undoubtedly has an

emergency texting system in place. It's a terrific idea, so that if there is any kind of problem on campus students can be notified.

It would be wonderful to have a system like that for your Activities Board, wouldn't it! Just think: you could send out a text to everyone on campus to announce your next event. How cool would that be!

Well, you can do just that. There is a service called "www.OnCampusText.com" that allows you to set up a broadcast texting system for your organization. It's very simple process of starting an account, and registering your "keyword" (that's your identifying name or phrase). Once you've established your account and keyword, students can sign up for your texts by texting your keyword to 71441. Then you can simply log on to your account, enter a 140 character message, and it will be sent to everyone who has signed up.

OnCampusText.com is a wonderful service, and very reasonable. It's currently charging about 100 dollars a month. You can also use their scheduling system, and plan your texts in advance. This is a great opportunity to use texting as part of a full marketing campaign.

Another Texting Service

Here's another texting method you can try-- for free. Open a free **Google Voice** account! You can use it to send and receive texts and phone calls for your Activities Board, and there is no charge. You can have incoming phone calls forwarded to another phone number if you want, or Google Voice will record a voicemail for you.

That voice mail will then be transcribed, and the text will be emailed to you or sent to your phone as a text. Or, you can just call and get the messages with your phone the

usual way. Or you can turn off the voice mail feature all together.

It's great to use the texting feature of GV. The only issue is you can only send a text to five numbers at a time. Still, you could type the text and copy it to your clipboard, then paste and send very quickly.

Tweet Tweet

There is one more way to set up a broadcast texting service. You have heard of "www.Twitter.com." Lots of folks have Twitter accounts. I do. Follow me at "www.Twitter.com/delsuggs." "Following" means signing up to receive messages from the person.

With Twitter, you log on and create your free account. Then you invite others to "follow" you and receive the 140-character micro-blogs you send. Most folks use their email address book to invite followers. Some folks receive and send "tweets" from their computer or from their cell phone by texting.

But Twitter was really designed and programmed for cell phone texting (SMS). That's why it has a 140-character limit on messages. So you can use it as a free broadcast texting service for everyone.

Here's how. You open your free account at Twitter.com. Then you invite student to follow you. Simply have them text "follow yourname" to 40404. Of course, "yourname" will be the name you register with Twitter. They don't need a Twitter account to receive your text messages. They only need a Twitter account if they want to send their own messages. In fact, they can sign up to receive your "tweets" and not even realize that Twitter is involved. And, again, standard texting charges apply.

Twitter calls this a "fast follow" and it's for people who want to follow but don't want a twitter account.

Two quick notes about fast follow: first, you text "follow username" to 40404, not "follow @username". And second, to stop getting the texts you send "stop username" to 40404. Be sure and let people know how to stop it when they want.

Also be sure to monitor the twitter account. I sometimes see under the "Mentions" of my account that someone has texted "stop @delsuggs". I know that they are trying to stop my messages, and that using the @ means it won't work. So I just block them with my account, and that keeps them from getting any more texts from my twitter feed.

A Gmail Hack

Twitter requires a separate email account for each Twitter account. You could just open a bunch of new email accounts in order to create your Twitter feeds. But try this hack!

Open a gmail account like Jdoe@gmail.com. You can use that to open a Twitter account. Then if you need another Twitter account, use the same address but add a "dot" like this: J.doe@gmail.com. If you need another address, add another dot, or put it in a different place.

See, Twitter sees each of those addressed as unique-- but Gmail doesn't. Any mail addressed to Jdoe or J.doe will go the the same, original email account. It's a simple way to create a new email for Twitter.

Automation Works

Here's a wonderful service that can make your social network marketing so much easier. Check out HootSuite.com. It works to connect your Facebook.com and Twitter.com updates from one site, so you don't have to log on to both of them and enter your message.

But I love to use it for it's scheduling system. Sure, you can schedule your status updates already on your

Facebook page. And you could just link your twitter and facebook pages together-- although then your Status updates would have to be 140 characters or less.

So why not use Hootsuite.com? Just create an online account, and link your social media accounts to it. You can enter updates to individual accounts or both. You can post photos. But most importantly, you can schedule your updates.

Wouldn't it be great to send everyone a text at 11:45am that said "The meeting starts at Noon, don't be late!" You can even use it to schedule a full publicity campaign, and schedule your updates to keep your friends and follows informed and interested. It works incredibly well-- in fact, I use it every day!

Work Smarter, Not Harder

There is the famous concept of "work smarter, not harder." It means using your head instead of your back. It means thinking instead of just doing. It means finding better ways to do the job, instead of the using the same method as before.

Please take advantage of the suggestions I've offered. There are always better, smarter, and generally easier ways to do something. You'll often get better results because you'll be more excited about doing something new. You may also be more productive.

But don't think you can use these smart ideas as a replacement for promotion. You'll still have to put up the posters, and the flyers. But by combining your traditional promotional techniques with these new, innovative ideas, you might just end up with "more cheeks in the seats." And that works out better for everyone.

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