East Riding College: Facebook Course Finder App

Summary

East Riding College made more efficient use of their marketing budget by reducing the amount of traditional media used to communicate with potential learners and increasing the promotion of courses via social media. They updated their online course search functionality and created a Facebook App. These changes, alongside a streamlined online/mobile application process, have resulted in more engagement with, and applications from, potential students.

About East Riding College

East Riding College welcomes more than 1,500 full-time students every year, with thousands more taking part-time and higher education courses. Their main campuses are in Beverley and Bridlington, with a smaller site in Hull. They are an ambitious Beacon College, committed to providing services of the very highest quality.

When the College was last inspected, in February 2011, it was rated by Ofsted as good with many outstanding features, including its care, guidance and support for students, its leadership and management and capacity to improve further, with staff being "ambitious for the College and relentless in their pursuit of seeking improvements for learners."

In June 2011, they were given Beacon Status for the excellent standard of education provided and outstanding leadership, management and financial management. East Riding College have a growing employer engagement section which provides training for businesses across the UK. They pride themselves on their flexible approach and ability to tailor services to employers' needs.
The challenge

East Riding College began to explore the possibility of using social media tools to support college systems and processes in August 2010 when they set up their Facebook and Twitter accounts. The aim was to make the online presence an interesting place to be. They could communicate key messages and press releases alongside social posts, with the intention of encouraging student recruitment and supporting learner retention.

More recently, Matthew Croshaw, Marketing and Communications Manager, began exploring whether they had an over reliance on traditional ‘paper-based’ media for course information (prospectuses) and marketing (paper adverts). His ultimate aim was to improve cost effectiveness by spending less on traditional marketing methods. This will free up resources to enable greater use of social media.

In terms of the challenge behind developing additional functionality for the Facebook page, Matthew’s aim was to improve the online course search so that users were more likely to want to look at the full course details and apply. He also wanted to reduce the number of clicks potential students needed to do to find out information about courses or contact the college.

The activity

Matthew developed specific plans and examples of possible changes in the media used to reach out to, and engage with, potential and existing students. Over time he plans to have a different treatment of prospectuses with less overarching, background information in each of them so that his budget can be used more efficiently, opening up opportunities to use social media platforms and tools.

To extend the capacity of the existing college IT staff, an external web developer was brought in to develop the online course search functionality. Through the development process the decision was made to develop an app that would enhance the existing Facebook page.
Matthew clarified that “the web developer took the existing Course Management System and added an additional view with Facebook specific styling and functionality and embedded it as a FB App/Tab on the existing server using SSL protocol”. Basic analytics have also been built in to enable simple reporting on usage.

To enhance the usability of the whole online application process, especially on mobile devices, Matthew has ensured that the forms that need to be completed have been stripped back to include only the essential information required to progress the application, avoiding large text fields. Matthew added that “the college student services team follow up initial applications to capture additional information needed from individuals.”

Finally to ensure that the tool helps with ongoing marketing, a ‘share’ button has been included on course information pages and also on the page after individuals have signed up to a course. This then promotes the College on the individual’s own Facebook timeline.
The outcomes

The main outcome from this case study is the Facebook App that was developed which improved the:

- Online course search
- Online availability of comprehensive course information
- Online / mobile application process

The impact

The key impacts from this case study include:

- Increased engagement with individuals who would not usually connect with the college via social media. Matthew comments that “in one case a potential student had arranged a meeting with a member of the guidance team within an hour of tweeting that they were ‘not sure what to do’.”
- A more cost effective use of the marketing budget by using both traditional (paper-based) and newer (social / online) media.
- Instant buy in from younger staff. Familiar technologies are being used and they know why it is good.
- Appreciation from other staff as they are aware of the phenomenon of Facebook.

Matthew also feels that “users of the Facebook page are more likely to follow through their course search to application because they are not directed away to the college website, and therefore complete the activity in fewer clicks.” However as the applications come via the same database it is difficult, at this stage, to establish exactly how many applications are coming directly from the Facebook Application.

The lessons learned

The Facebook App has only recently been implemented and Matthew stated that the main point to remember is to “factor in capacity to promote new tools as it will probably not happen organically”, adding that the ‘share’ function should enhance awareness naturally and authentically because it is being shared to friends of individuals who have seen a course they are interested in and have applied for.

The next steps for East Riding College include:

- Publicising and promoting their enhanced social presence in the local press.
- Investigating ways in which Facebook can be used within college (to match up to the positive work being done externally) and how this may impact on existing policies around access to social media via the

[www.jiscsrc.ac.uk/case-studies](http://www.jiscsrc.ac.uk/case-studies)
college network.

Useful links

East Riding College Website
Facebook app

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