global focus

EFMD

Special supplement

What makes a great business school website?

Assessing the findings of the 2008 Generation Web study

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What makes a great business school website?

Welcome to the EFMD *Global Focus* special supplement which looks at the role, and importance, of websites for business schools.

As you read this, think of the person who at this very moment is looking at your business school website. They may be just round the corner, they may be several thousand miles away. They may be a prospective student, from the media or a business person looking to develop a partnership. How long will they stay, will they find what they are looking for and will they make contact? Simply put, is your website working?

CarringtonCrisp, together with EFMD and ABS (the Association of Business Schools), have just produced their second report, Generation Web, on what makes a great business school website. Among the headlines are that over 90% of prospective students use the web to find out about schools, about 1 in 4 have no firm idea where they will study when they first look on the web and almost 60% begin their search looking for a course rather than a school.

This year's study also found that Deans are disappearing from home pages. Historically, the home page of many business school websites prominently featured a welcome message from the Dean, taking up space that could be better used to sell the benefits of studying at a school.

Designing and building an effective school website begins in two very different places – the minds of the potential site visitors and the school strategy. Ultimately, the site is a communication tool that helps deliver the school strategy, without clarity about the school's objectives, the website can easily become a wasted opportunity. Similarly, without thinking about potential site users and understanding how they use the web and what they want from a school site, there is a danger that the site communicates little more than the internal structure of an institution.

A reasonable starting point is a school home page, but it's not sufficient. Given the 60% who search for courses, the Google results are as likely to send a potential student directly to a course page rather than the school home page. Navigation needs to be as good on a course page as it is from the home page or a site visitor can easily become frustrated.

There's also the question of what Google says about your school. If you're not on the first page of results there's a good chance that the browsing potential student will head off to other schools instead of yours. Currently, Google produces around 73,000,000 responses to a search for the term "business school".

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1:4

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Getting to the home page is not just about Google. Almost half of those searching for business schools and their courses for the first time make use of third-party guides. Ensuring schools appear in the best guides will bring more traffic to a school website.

A few years ago a potential student might also have found a website address on an advertisement in a magazine or newspaper or have picked up a brochure at a fair which pointed them to a website. Today the tables have turned and a new student is more likely to begin searching on the Internet and then order a prospectus or download a brochure when they reach the website of a school that matches their needs. Just over one-third of those taking part in the Generation Web study said they already had a school website address when they started searching on the Internet.

Having reached a school home page, prospective students want three things more than anything else – course details, course costs and career services. One-click access from the home page to this information is important as a new student wants to know what he or she can study, what it will cost them and what will be the return on their investment. The top site in this year's study was the European Business School, London, and was one of the few sites that had links to all this information from its home page.

Although price comparison websites exist for many goods and services, this trend hasn't yet reached the business school market, but this does not mean that potential students aren't carrying out the exercise for themselves. Just as a new student might turn to the rankings in the *Financial Times* to see how one school compares against another, students are doing their own assessment of how fees compare between schools. In separate research earlier this year CarringtonCrisp found that between 5% and 15% of MBA students would have reconsidered their studies if the current global economic conditions had existed when they were thinking about where to study.

The home page is about more than links and numbers. A successful home page will make an impact. It will instantly establish expectations about a school in the mind of the site visitor, whether it does this with design, photography or copy. Just as a good advertisement sends a message about a product, service or company, so a good website home page creates perceptions that can influence a potential student as they look through the rest of a site.

The Newcastle University Business School site (right) was one of the top performers in the Generation Web study for initial home page impact. Significantly, the home page manages to provide links to large amounts of information without the page having a crowded feel. Imagery is used to support the navigation and to create a feel for the school. Although part of a much larger university the Business School site also has its own distinctive look while still being clearly part of the larger university.

Perhaps, most importantly, a home page needs a search engine. Such a statement may be surprising because of all places in a website a home page might be expected to have good links to all other parts of a site. Just under 40% of those taking part in the Generation Web study said that they would use a site search tool rather than the navigation links provided. The problem is language.
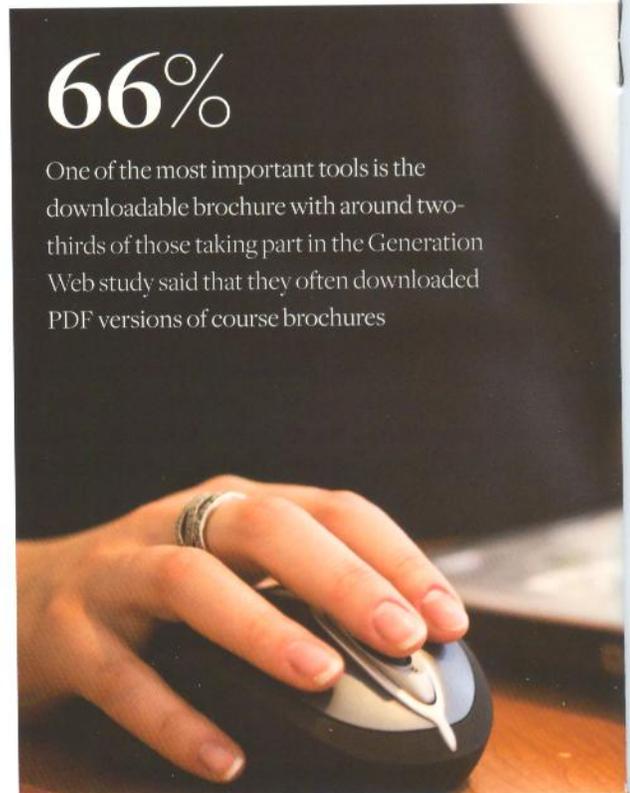
66%

One of the most important tools is the downloadable brochure with around two-thirds of those taking part in the Generation Web study said that they often downloaded PDF versions of course brochures

'Having set the tone for a website on the home page that feel needs to be consistent throughout, but there's more to a great business school website than staying on message'

Language makes a difference in three different ways. Site users have to understand at least three different languages to successfully navigate a business school website – the language of business, academic language and the language a site is written in. A prospective student may be weak on any one of these three languages and will turn to a search engine to look for what they know and understand. The search engine is particularly important for prospective undergraduate students who will have less knowledge of business and business schools than those considering a masters degree.

While a good site search engine can make a site, it can also create problems, especially on international sites providing information in more than one language. Several of the sites in the study returned search results in a different language from that used in the search causing confusion and frustration for the site visitor.

Having set the tone for a website on the home page that feel needs to be consistent throughout, but there's more to a great business school website than staying on message. Today's websites make use of a range of additional tools to engage site visitors.

The IE business school website was rated one of the most attractive sites in the Generation Web study with strong consistency throughout the site, but added to the site through the use of video and Google Maps. Students joining the International MBA programme at IE in Madrid have also used the web to start networking before the course began by creating a page on Facebook for those accepted on to the course.

One of the most important tools is the downloadable brochure. Almost two-thirds of those taking part in the Generation Web study said that they often downloaded PDF versions of course brochures. With the volume of information on a website it may be something of a surprise that students then want to download summary information in a brochure and print out a hard copy.

There are several reasons for downloading course brochures. Rather than having to constantly refer back to a website a student considering where and what to study can have the information at hand for several schools at the same time, allowing comparisons to be made more easily. Time on the web may be limited and having a course brochure in hard copy means time to reflect and consider options more carefully when time allows.

In some parts of the world the broadband connections may not be strong and the ability to go into a site and quickly pull-off key information will be particularly useful. Downloadable brochures can also provide a great benefit in spreading understanding.

While a prospective student may speak and understand the language of tuition at a school this will not always be true of those paying for the course, be that parents or employers. Translating and maintaining an entire site in another language can be expensive and difficult, but providing key information in other languages in downloadable brochures offers a good solution for reaching international audiences. The simple act of translating a home page proved popular with those taking part in the study who took it to be a welcoming sign for international students.

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Alongside downloadable brochures, podcasts are becoming popular with more than 45% indicating that they would like more information provided in this format. For the iPod generation it is natural to listen to or watch information in this format whether it is a short piece with current students giving their views about an institution or a lecture from a distinguished faculty member.

Not all the information being accessed on the web in the search for what and where to study is necessarily found on the school website. Podcasts are a good example with the development of the iTunesU website where more than 100 institutions already provide a host of free information to download. The information provided has been carefully put together by these institutions to convey key marketing messages unlike much of the user-generated content that now appears on the web.

Around 20% of those taking part in the Generation Web study say they use social networking sites, read blogs or look on video sharing websites when seeking information about courses and schools. A search on YouTube for any of the schools taking part in the study revealed that there were rarely less than 100 videos about that institution, the majority having been put up by students rather than the institutions. The potential power of this medium can be demonstrated by a search for Columbia Business School on YouTube. A video produced by students as part of an end of year show has now been watched by more than one million people.

Despite the vast growth in the role that the Internet plays in helping students decide what and where to study, the final choice most often still depends on human contact. Throughout the Generation Web study and other research carried out by CarringtonCrisp students say that meeting staff and current students are key to their choice of business school.

Of course, the school website may facilitate human contact with information on how to reach staff. For example by providing "Messenger" or "Wikipedia" style services for prospective students to interact with staff and current students, through details of open days with sign-up facilities to begin a relationship between an institution and a prospective student or by advertising attendance at fairs where people can meet.

Recent estimates suggest that the global middle class population is growing by around 20 million people per year. Many of these will be seeking a high-quality business education in the future; already in the UK 1 in 7 undergraduates studies a business related course.

To stand out in the crowded business school marketplace, an effective business school website must be a given. That site will have to meet the demands of many different audiences, not just the prospective student. The site will need to be about more than simply providing information and it will have to be seen in the context of visitors gathering information from many other sources, much of which is not in the control of the business school.
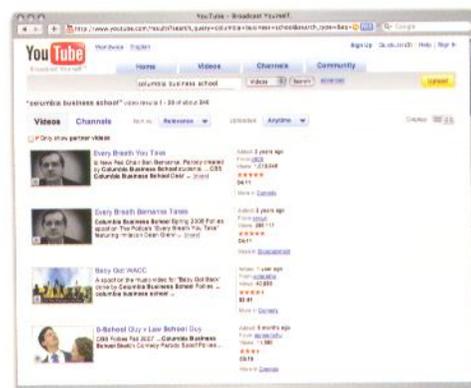
1:7

Many of the new global middle class population will be seeking
a high-quality business education in the future; already in the UK
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Summary of key findings from Generation Web

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
When I first used the Internet to search for information about business schools I had no idea where I wanted to study	24.5	32.7	14.9	16.8	11.1
When I first used the Internet I used a search engine to find information about schools offering a particular subject	11.5	15.4	16.8	34.1	22.1
When I first used the Internet I already had the web address of a school(s) that I was interested in	24.9	25.4	15.3	19.6	14.8
When I first used the Internet I had already decided where I wanted to study	25.8	27.8	14.4	18.7	13.4
When I first used the Internet I used third-party guides to gather information about potential schools and courses	11.3	18.1	22.1	24	24.5
I did not use the Internet when searching for information about business schools and course	72.9	14.8	6.7	3.3	2.4
I often downloaded pdf versions of course brochures when available	10.1	12	14.8	28.7	34.5
I would like more information provided as downloadable podcasts	16.1	21.5	17.1	26.3	19
I search for information on blogs about business schools and universities	38.3	27.3	14.8	12.4	7.2
When I first visit a business school website I prefer to use the site search engine rather than the navigation to find what I am looking for	20.7	24	16.8	22.1	16.4

Left from top to bottom:

ESADE homepage

YouTube results for Columbia
Business School

IE Business School course listing

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Perhaps, more than anything else, a great business school website will be the tool that starts a relationship with a site visitor when they know little about a school, continues it with them while they are studying with the school and maintains the relationship far into the future after they have graduated.

The next Generation Web study takes place in early 2009.

To find out how to take part and improve your school website contact Andrew Crisp or Matthew Wood:
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Alternatively visit the CarringtonCrisp website or the EFMD website at:
www.carringtoncrisp.com
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