Executive Summary

Are porton business school websites

GenerationWeb 2011
A report on business school websites

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
Introduction

GenerationWeb first ran in 2007 and since that time this annual study has reviewed around 75 business school websites, determining what students want from the web experience and how they use school sites. Run by CarringtonCrisp, the study is supported by The Association of Business Schools (ABS), EFMD and the Canadian Federation of Business School Deans.

Students taking part in the study are asked about how they use the web when deciding what and where to study. They are also asked to review a number of school websites, rating each website according to a fixed set of criteria which measure how easy it is to find information on a business school website and interest in the information found.

Research for GenerationWeb 2011 was carried out in March and April 2011. Undergraduates and postgraduates from 38 nationalities took part, with the four largest nationalities represented by the UK, China, Malaysia and Vietnam. The respondent sample was split 55% male, 45% female and was also split 62% undergraduates, 38% postgraduates. The summary that follows focuses on some of the key elements of the study in 2011.

From the beginning

The business school home page has to appeal to audiences from 16-60, from round the corner to around the world and from new student to successful entrepreneur. Given many schools have to work within a university web template, what can be done to position a business school for these different audiences? A set up that allows both the corporate brand strengths of the university along with the particular personality of the faculty/school looks like the best solution.

The home page must make it easy for site visitors to quickly move to the information that is relevant to them. For potential students, it is the three Cs that are most important – course, cost and career.

Career information is especially significant, not just for current students, but also for prospective students and alumni. Prospective students are increasingly focused on outcomes when measuring the value for money aspects of their chosen degree, i.e. what job can I expect on graduation. Details of graduate careers, either in the form of testimonials or statistics on employment rates, will be welcomed by prospective students.
Cost has always been a consideration for those considering a degree and with the web it has become easier to make comparisons. Schools without clear fee information will put themselves at a disadvantage when a prospective student is making comparisons; it simply becomes another barrier to making a decision. As well as fee information students are increasingly looking to understand details of cost of living, including food, accommodation, travel and books.

Words and pictures

Having arrived on a business school website more candidates (48%) prefer to search rather than navigate (33%). Often put off by academic jargon users will search for words and phrases that mean something to them and then try to navigate from the results.

As much as the web is a visual experience, if the images are not supported by strong copy, the site user experience will be diminished. The key is to think about the customer and ensure copy is written from an external rather than internal perspective.

In seeking to make the web experience a positive one for prospective students, schools try to be comprehensive with links to almost everything and consequently, web pages tend to become over long. Where parents are expected to make a significant contribution to study fees, they may be even more demanding than prospective students and copy grows further, leading to lengthy page scrolling.

Information, which requires more than four clicks or two scrolls to reach it, may never be seen as site users look elsewhere. Tactics that are being used successfully by business schools are a summary of key information either in a side bar or a box at the top of the page, or a set of tabs for key pieces of copy, effectively creating pages within a page and making it easy to move back and forth between different items.

Too many business school websites have gone down the route of simply showing pictures of smiling students. Photography could be switched from one site to another with no discernible difference, reducing brand distinctiveness.

Accommodation provides an opportunity to make good use of photography. The outside of the accommodation, unless it is a very special building, is far less important than the rooms that the students will live in and consequently, this is what should appear in photographs.
Over 60% already often download PDF versions of course brochures, which can be particularly valuable for international students. Many international students may have their fees paid by a parent or employer who does not speak or read well the language of tuition used by a business school. A short brochure in their own language will help persuade them that what their son/daughter/employee is saying is correct.

**Speed and search**

Two sites were particularly well received by students in this year’s study – Sheffield Business School and Kingston Business School. One of the strengths of both sites is their ease of navigation. However, the three criteria that probably have the greatest impact on the ratings given across a site are initial home page impact, speed of site and effectiveness of site search.
A slow site will have a greater impact on perceptions than almost anything else on a website. Poor site search effectiveness, with slow, inaccurate results, confusion from university-wide results or loss of branding and navigation by moving off-site to a third-party search service will also put off site users.

Want to know more?

With growing interaction, static frequently asked question pages have begun to look out of date. A better approach is to provide a mechanism for questions to be asked and then answered either by current students or alumni. Current students and alumni will be available on social media sites, so why not have them available on business school websites? Answered questions should then be put into a searchable database for future students.

Most prospective students will have a minimum expectation of a link to Google Maps accompanied by travel and transport details. Road maps, train, bus, plane and ferry timetables, and links to relevant sites with booking systems and ticket prices will be welcomed. At every step, it is about making it easier for the prospective student to choose your school.

Where a location is well known it also makes sense to use iconic images that will be recognised internationally. However, care should be taken not to make a website look like a tourist brochure – one student described a school website as ‘looking like the site of a 5-star luxury hotel’.
No entry

One common barrier to progressing interest in a school or programme is the requirement to provide large amounts of information when registering for open days or downloading a course brochure. Denying access to those unwilling to commit personal information to a university database reduces the likelihood of a potential application.

Been there, done that and bought the T-shirt

Alumni provide the authentic voice that is often sought by prospective students. Even simple use of alumni profiles and quotes can go some way to credentialise the offer that business schools are making on their websites.

For alumni themselves it becomes even more important that the alumni pages of a school website have a clear purpose and add value to the business school experience. If not, they risk being replaced by informal networks on social media.

Size matters and smaller is better

A growing number of students (around 25%) access the web on a mobile device anywhere. Consequently, page size matters and needs to be considered alongside design or site users may miss out on key information.
### Beyond the business school website

Inevitably, social media is growing in importance. However, while 87% of student respondents in a recent CarringtonCrisp study say that they use their preferred social media site at least once a day, their use for business school-related subjects is still relatively small. The main uses of social media are contacting old friends, sending mail and posting information.

Where social media is starting to have a clear role is for prospective students to contact current students or alumni. Such contacts provide an authentic voice rather than the 'official' voices of marketing, administrative or academic staff. For a business school, using social media also means knowing more than Facebook and LinkedIn. In China, renren (formerly known as Xiaonei) is prevalent, in Brazil the Google service Orkut leads Facebook and in the Netherlands the big student social network is called Hyves.

Twitter is little used by prospective business school students. In all studies undertaken by CarringtonCrisp typically 70% of respondents say they don’t use Twitter. While Twitter has a limited role in the marketing mix, it is proving to be a useful tool for media relations and internal communications.
iTunes is widely used by business students, but mostly to purchase music, film and TV with rarely more than 15% using the service to download material from the universities, business schools and colleges now offering free downloads. However, there are already good examples of universities and schools adapting the technology for course delivery and other purposes – the Open University in the UK has now had more than 20 million downloads from iTunesU – and overall usage seems likely to grow.

The big picture

With so much information available elsewhere on the web, the business school website needs to work much harder to add value to the site visitor experience. To get an overall sense of the impact of the websites in the study, respondents were asked if having seen each site, if all other things had been equal, they would have been more or less likely to apply to each business school. Results varied widely; at one school more than 80% of respondents said they would have been more likely to have applied, while at another almost 60% said they would have been less likely to have applied.
“The CarringtonCrisp report on the performance of our web site has provided us with a wealth of invaluable information. It was a thoroughly worthwhile investment.”

Professor Alison Preston
Director, Curtin Graduate School of Business

A website represents a substantial marketing investment, both in terms of cost and potential impact, so getting it right is key. If you want to know about:

• the strengths and weaknesses of your business school website;
• trends and best practice among other business school websites;
• how prospective students use the web when deciding what and where to study;
• what site content is key to helping students decide where to study;
• which business school websites are considered most effective by student audiences; and
• which third-party sites are used by students in their decision making;

take part in the next GenerationWeb study in March 2012.

The GenerationWeb study answers all these questions and many more, providing a business school with key information to help them enhance their website, drive greater value from their marketing budget and better meet prospective student needs.

To take part in the next GenerationWeb study in March 2012, contact us at info@carringtoncrisp.com or complete the booking form below. Reports will be available for participating schools in June 2012.

For schools booking before 1 January 2012, get a £500/€575 discount on the usual price of £3000/€3450.

All prices are exclusive of VAT, which, where required, will be added at the applicable rate.

Participating schools receive:
• a market-wide report on best practice on business school websites and the use of the web by prospective students
• a personalised report on the strengths and weaknesses of your school website; and
• an on-campus presentation of the survey results.
Name and address of Business School:

Project Coordinator:

Title:

Telephone Number:

Email Address:

School website address:

Please accept this completed application form and a cheque or send me an invoice for the amount shown below.

Signature of Lead Contact

Date

Please send your completed booking form to: CarringtonCrisp Ltd, 34 Ladbroke Square, London, W11 3NB, UK or fax to +44 (0) 20 7229 9310. For queries, please contact CarringtonCrisp on +44 (0) 20 7229 7373 or by email at info@carringtoncrisp.com