

Using Web Features

to Achieve Your Communications Goals

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If you believe your website could be working harder to help you: jump start your annual giving; increase target audience applications; defend against a new competitor in your market; or meet other high-priority goals; consider using a web feature. These short, high-impact tools will capture—and keep—your audience’s attention.

We offer case studies of how schools have used web features to achieve their communications goals.



WHAT IS A WEB FEATURE?

Definitions of internet terms—especially emerging techniques—can vary. At Zehno, we use the term “web feature” to refer to web content—pages, graphics, Flash—that lives within another website. Typically, web features don’t use complicated navigation or act as catalogs of information. Their goal is to offer visitors more of an experience or feeling.

A web feature is different from a “microsite,” which is the term we use at Zehno to refer to sites that are self-contained and independent from a university site-at-large. Microsites are smaller than the university site, but larger than a web feature. Many schools use microsites for admissions or alumni. Microsites often contain several layers of navigation, which visitors use to drill down to the information they seek.

Web features can be promoted solely on an existing website—e.g., “See our interactive timeline”—or they can be part of a larger cross-media promotion. For example, a web feature targeted at alumni donors could be used as a call to action in a brochure sent to that audience.

WHAT DO WEB FEATURES DO THAT REGULAR WEB PAGES DON'T?

Web features offer advantages over regular web pages within a large university site or microsite, mostly because they can be designed independently of regular templated web pages.

Freed from the a busy page that contains navigational links to topics, long running copy, restricted space for visuals, etc., web features are better able to communicate experience and tell stories by using visuals and user input and feedback that heighten emotional connections.

Copy and content for web features is often formatted more like a commercial than the running informational copy found on most web pages. Through short infobites, links with choices for the user to explore, user feedback through rollovers, sound effects and action-oriented verbs like “see more,” web features offer a more participatory experience that doesn’t stress attention spans.



The Broad MBA Program at Michigan State University showcases its competitive advantages of team building and case competition excellence through web features promoted in its printed viewbook and within the website:

mba.bus.msu.edu/leadership/features/collaborate/index.html
mba.bus.msu.edu/leadership/features/compete/index.html



Yale's web feature tour not only contains the expected beauty shots of campus, but also graphics and videos detailing student demographics, faculty prestige and more:

www.yale.edu/collegetour/frameset/tour.html

Another advantage of web features is that they can be promoted and accessible in locations across a website. Web features don't have to be filed under just one navigational heading. Instead, these pop-up sites can be linked from many pages across a site. Because they typically open a new window, site visitors can return to their point of entry when they're finished experiencing the content.

TYPES OF WEB FEATURES:

Web features are great tools for creating connections with your institution's audiences. You may choose to use a web feature to:



SHOWCASE COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGES

The Broad MBA Program at Michigan State University highlighted its strengths in team building and case competition excellence through web features promoted in its printed viewbook using specialized URLs and within the website. Each feature uses a student storyteller who speaks directly to the prospective applicant. Casual, genuine language and relaxed photography that illustrates these real people tie back into the family feel of the program.

mba.bus.msu.edu/collaborate
mba.bus.msu.edu/compete

Vanderbilt University's Peabody College created an admissions web feature called The Peabody Difference for first-time visitors unfamiliar with the benefits and returns of the programs. To reinforce the competitive advantages of the school, the feature focuses on the story of how Peabody's people and traditions impact the words of education and human development. The Flash-based tour offers a highly visual and personality-driven glimpse into the school's differences.

www.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/The_Peabody_Difference/The_Peabody_Difference.xml

Our Lady of Holy Cross College moved away from a traditional viewbook in favor of a "virtual viewbook." Visitors of the Build Your Future web feature create a personalized guide to find the specific information they are searching for and get a taste of the kind of personal experience they'll have if they attend OLHCC. The interactive application asks questions to prospective students and parents and leads them through a personalized tour of their program of choice based on their answers. The viewer can customize a "virtual student" to guide him or her through the web feature. The viewer can select a model student, academic accessories and background. These avatars provide running audio commentary.

www.olhcc.edu/prebuilt/feature/index.html

Yale University took seemingly disparate attributes—books published by recent alumni, time-lapse animation of a campus bulletin board, campus beauty shots—and turned them into a non-conventional online tour.

www.yale.edu/collegetour/frameset/tour.html

Capella University created "A night in the life of a Capella learner" to show prospects how their online class schedule can fit into their hectic lives.

www.capella.edu



OFFER A TOUR OF A WEBSITE OR CAMPUS

In the Your World at Pacific web feature, University of the Pacific included a virtual tour. Beyond the staid shots of buildings, brick and ivy, the audio tour allowed site visitors to interact with 360-degree panoramic photos, and included audio quotes from student guides about their favorite haunts.

www.pacific.edu/cms-apps.admission/feature



CALL ATTENTION TO A PARTICULAR PROMOTION OR EVENT

Princeton University's Office of Development used a web feature to promote Annual Giving during 2003-04. Beautiful imagery of campus combined with headline-style copy leads viewers through the feature and reminds alumni and donors of their connections to the school. At the end, visitors were encouraged to donate to the fund or request more information about annual giving.

www.princeton.edu/ag/Spirit_of_Princeton1/



Visitors to Our Lady of Holy Cross College's website create a personalized guide to learn about programs offered and the OLHCC community, and are then encouraged to take the next step in the enrollment process.

www.olhcc.edu/prebuilt/feature/index.html



TARGET SPECIFIC AUDIENCES

The Broad MBA Program at Michigan State University reached out to specific target audiences by creating web features specifically for them. The features were promoted in special mailings. Once at the site, prospects heard first-hand stories about the benefits of Broad's program. Throughout the feature, upcoming admissions events specifically for these targeted populations were promoted via a "sign up now" link, which was also promoted from the feature's final screen.

mba.bus.msu.edu/life/women.cfm

mba.bus.msu.edu/life/diversity.cfm



DESIGN AND PRODUCTION OF WEB FEATURES

There's no one way to design a web feature. Form should follow function, as well as the skill and experience of site users. Features aimed at prospective undergraduates can include levels of sophistication that alumni donors may find confusing and distracting. Formats and features include

- linear experiences, where visitors click through a series of ordered screens or an animation carries them through
- hub-and-spoke architecture, which uses a home menu of choices that visitors can explore while the home menu remains one click away
- Flash animation, to add polish and visual interest to the transitions. Flash is also one of the easier ways to add sound to a web feature
- embedded video and audio
- user feedback required to drive the story forward (keep moving mouse to the right to continue, etc.)



MAKE IT WORK FOR YOU

Web features offer institutions ways to break out of their familiar web-site formats to make new connections.

ABOUT ZEHNO

Zehno has worked with many schools and programs to help design and produce effective web features. To learn more about the projects mentioned above, or to talk about how Zehno can assist you with your web or print communications, call 1-888-898-8584 or write info@zehno.com.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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