

**Online Marketing Plan:
Digital and Analytical Prospectus for Pacific Union College**

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I was a member of the Board of Trustees for the institution described in this paper from May of 2020 to December of 2022, and own an online marketing agency which has served education clients. I have no further conflicts of interest to disclose.

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Abstract

Pacific Union College is a liberal arts college in Northern California. This paper gives a brief history of the institution and its current state, outlines its current online marketing efforts, describes the benefits of an online marketing plan covering eight marketing channels, and proposes three digital analytics initiatives that could be implemented to drive new student enrollment, retention of current students, and increased financial support from donors.

Keywords: Pacific Union College, higher education, online marketing, sentiment analysis, network analysis, content marketing

Online Marketing Plan:

Digital and Analytical Prospectus for Pacific Union College

Pacific Union College (PUC) is a liberal arts college in Northern California. This paper gives a brief history of the institution and its current state, outlines its current online marketing efforts, describes the benefits of an online marketing plan covering eight marketing channels, and proposes three digital analytics initiatives to drive new student enrollment, retention of current students, and increases in donated financial support.

Organizational Profile

PUC is a four-year liberal arts college located in the Napa Valley area of California. Founded in 1882 in Healdsburg, CA, it moved to its present campus in Angwin, CA, in 1909 (Utt, 1996). PUC is one of 12 Seventh-day Adventist institutions of higher learning in the United States and the oldest West of the Mississippi River (Association of Adventist Colleges and Universities, 2022). It had enrollment of 829 undergraduate students in Fall of 2021 (U.S. News & World Report, 2022). Earlier this year, *U.S. News* noted PUC has one of the most diverse student populations in the nation, with white students representing just 21% of the study body, placing this ethnicity third behind Hispanic and Asian students (Wood, 2023). The school was most recently ranked in the top 20 regional colleges in the Western United States (U.S. News & World Report, 2022).

PUC's mission statement is this: "Pacific Union College is a Seventh-day Adventist learning community offering an excellent Christ-centered education that prepares its students for productive lives of useful human service and uncompromising personal integrity" (Pacific Union College, 2022, p. 2). Its student handbook lists its core values as inquiry, excellence, integrity in human relationships, service, Christian witness, and community (Pacific Union College, 2022, p.

2). PUC has defined its institutional student learning outcomes using the acronym “WISDOM”: wholeness, integrity, service and stewardship, diversity, our Adventist heritage, and maintaining lifelong learning (Pacific Union College, 2022, pp. 3-4). And it uses a brief three-sentence tagline in marketing: “Learn with purpose. Rise in faith. Serve with love” (Pacific Union College, 2021a).

The institution is led by its president, Ralph Trecartin, along with vice presidents for academic administration, advancement, financial administration, marketing and enrollment services, and student life (Pacific Union College, 2022). In 2021, the school reported a total of 209 staff, including 69 instructional staff and 45 in some level of administration (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021).

Enrollment has dropped precipitously, falling 50% in eight years from 1,678 students in Fall of 2013 (Wheeler, 2013). As one would expect, this decline has had a negative impact on the institution’s financial condition, with revenues dropping from \$67.0 million in 2014 (Internal Revenue Service, 2014) to \$51.8 million in 2019 (Internal Revenue Service, 2019). The Covid-19 pandemic caused an even more alarming drop to \$41.7 million in 2020 (Internal Revenue Service, 2020) and \$36.1 million in 2021 (Internal Revenue Service, 2021). In 2021, PUC reported debt from long-term notes and lines of credit totaling over \$48.5 million, up from \$31.6 million five years earlier (Internal Revenue Service, 2021).

The deterioration of PUC’s financial condition led to a notice of concern in 2020 from the school’s primary accreditation body, the WASC Senior College and University Commission, specifically citing financial concerns (Studley). This, coupled with the widely-known enrollment decline, generated negative publicity for the school among its core Seventh-day Adventist constituency (e.g., Seibold, 2020; Spectrum Magazine, 2020).

In 2021, PUC announced a new vision for its future with four main components: streamlined academic offerings, a revitalized Angwin campus, remote education centers, and an online campus (Pacific Union College, 2021a). Its academic offerings will focus on nursing; business; spiritual, global and community service; visual arts and communication; science and technology; and behavioral sciences. The school considers its Angwin campus to be its “heart and soul,” while as many as 12 new remote education centers throughout California and other Western States “will be the arms and the legs that put the school in motion within communities” (Pacific Union College, 2021a, para. 10). Finally, a new online campus will serve even more offsite students and make PUC education more accessible. The school is working with its accrediting bodies to implement this new vision, which if successful will give the institution long-term viability (Pacific Union College, 2021a, para. 17).

Existing Digital Presence

PUC has a solid online presence and makes extensive use of a variety of social media. This section provides more detail about its existing digital presence, looking at its website, social media, and mobile apps.

Website

PUC’s website is robust, with content directed at prospect students, current students, and donors, as well as other audiences (Pacific Union College, n.d.-f). Its website uses a popup form to simplify the process of requesting more information, along with strong calls to action in its program listings (Pacific Union College, n.d.-f). This appears to have the purpose of capturing enrollment leads to be worked by enrollment counselors. The website footer has links to the school’s profiles on Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and LinkedIn (Pacific Union College, n.d.-f), in an attempt to drive traffic to recent social media posts. There are also links to

dedicated iOS and Android apps and an active blog targeting current students. On pages directed at donors, a popup form invites users to make a financial contribution, which can be completed online (Pacific Union College, n.d.-f), in an attempt to increase the base of financial support for the institution.

Social Media

PUC makes use of a variety of social media platforms. Its Instagram profile shows 4,855 follows and nine posts in the last five days (Pacific Union College, n.d.-a), while its Facebook page shows over 11,000 followers and eight posts in the last five days (Pacific Union College, n.d.-b). PUC's YouTube channel has 1,130 subscribers, with nine various promotional videos posted in the last six months (Pacific Union College, n.d.-d). It also contains archives of livestreams from weekly chapels, weekend worship services, and athletic events, with 20 videos posted in the last five days (Pacific Union College, n.d.-c). PUC's Twitter profile shows 6,365 followers and eight tweets in the last seven days (Pacific Union College, n.d.-e), while its LinkedIn page has 13,414 followers and eight posts in the last five days (Pacific Union College, n.d.-f). The apparent purpose of posts on each of these platforms is to keep PUC friends and family informed of the current happenings on campus.

Mobile Apps

PUC has two mobile apps available on the Apple App Store. The first is a general app to keep students, faculty, and staff "up to date with what is happening on and off-campus" and to help them stay "connected with events, news, classes, the Cafe menu and so much more" (Pacific Union College 2021b, para. 1). It appears the purpose of this app is informational for current students and friends of the college, and contains content similar the school's the social media accounts. The second app is for taking a virtual tour of the campus, where "prospective students

and families can navigate the campus and learn about our unique locations, programs and culture through self-guided tours” (Pacific Union College, 2019, para. 1). This is clearly targeted at prospective students and their families, in an attempt to increase their familiarity with the campus and draw them toward enrolling.

Proposed Online Marketing Plan

An online marketing plan is a strategic document that details tactics, metrics, and goals for an organization’s marketing activity through digital channels. According to Boyd (2015), “A marketing plan provides a roadmap for running and coordinating marketing programs. It helps align the many people and organizations involved in commercializing your products and services” (Understanding why a marketing plan is important, 0:09). Boyd went on to say that a good marketing plan will answer three questions: “Where are we now? Where are we going? And how do we get there?” (Understanding why a marketing plan is important, 0:39). And Batesole (2018) said that a thorough online marketing plan should consider eight areas: website content, search engine optimization, search and display marketing, social media marketing, video marketing, email marketing, content marketing, and mobile marketing.

The marketing activities of institutions of higher learning have been important for some time, in the midst of an increasingly competitive landscape driven by declining enrollment trends (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006). It is even more important today as this trend accelerates, with higher education enrollment forecasted to drop by 15% between 2019 and 2026 (Kline, 2019). And the Covid-19 pandemic accelerated a correlated trend of school closures, with 861 closures since 2004, representing 15% of higher education institutions in the United States (Barshay, 2022). In this context, marketing is crucial to the survival of PUC, and an online marketing plan is the foundation for executing effective online marketing campaigns.

Audience Messaging

PUC has three key audiences to consider in its marketing communication: prospective students, current students, and donors (Maresova, et al., 2020). Prospective students need to be given the information they need—experience an emotional connection to the campus—to drive enrollment. Retention of current students requires not just fostering an academic environment that meets their educational needs, but a community experience that also offers opportunities to grow socially, emotionally, physically, and spiritually. Current and potential financial supporters need to be drawn into the story of PUC and help match their donor interests with campus needs.

An online marketing plan must account for all three audiences and how each interacts with the PUC brand (Maresova, et al., 2020). Irrespective of the communication channel being utilized, there are some general areas of focus to consider when developing messaging for each of these three core higher education audiences. For prospective students, Jeckells (2022) found that accreditation, price, and rankings have considerable influence on consumer decision-making among members of this audience. For current students, according to Rehman, et al. (2022), their academic experience, satisfaction, and loyalty to the institution were significant factors in driving retention and re-enrollment in subsequent courses of study, such as graduate programs after completion of a bachelor's degree. Therefore, standardizing the online components of classes through education platforms such as Canvas or Blackboard could increase student satisfaction, thereby assisting in the retention of current students. And for financial supporters, Saxton and Wang (2014) point out that institutions must demonstrate value to the donor that justifies the donation. In the case of PUC, due to its present circumstances the long-term viability of the institution must be consistently communicated, along with how donations impact current students.

Digital Analytics

To determine the effectiveness of an online marketing program, digital analytics are a crucial foundation. According to Sponder and Khan (2018), “Digital analytics is the study of various forms of business data to improve the online experience of a business and its customers” (p. 1). They made a distinction between structured data, which is neatly collected and organized in a form that is easy to process and analyze; unstructured data, which is *not* neatly organized; and semi-structured data, which “consists of information that is nearly prepared and ready to be organized, but lacks the cleaning and organization necessary for it to be processed” (Sponder & Kahn, 2018, p. 2).

Waite and Perez-Vega (2018) noted that there is a difference between metrics and analytics. “Metrics is the process of collecting data,” while “analytics is the process of selecting, combining and related metrics to produce answers to business questions” (Waite & Perez-Vega, 2018, p.137). They also stated, “Metrics involves identifying and collecting numerical data. Analytics involves selecting appropriate metrics and conducting numerical analysis to show significant patterns in the data” (Waite & Perez-Vega, 2018, p. 137).

Website Metrics

For websites, metrics need to be captured related to attraction, acquisition, conversion, and retention of users (Waite & Perez-Vega, 2018, ch. 9). PUC should consider search engine rankings for appropriate keywords to measure website attraction; traffic source, bounce rates, and time on page to measure acquisition; and conversion rate and cost per conversion to measure conversion. Measures of website retention are less important in this context, because PUC’s goal for prospective students is enrollment, not ongoing engagement with the website.

Google Analytics is one commonly-used tool for website metrics, as are Adobe Analytics and WebTrends (Sponder & Kahn, 2018, p. 79). Each of them offers the basic metrics noted above, with funnel visualization and sophisticated conversion tracking, which would be important to use in the context of PUC's enrollment marketing activities and fundraising.

Social Media Metrics

Sponder and Kahn (2018) stated, "Social Media Analytics is the art and science of extracting valuable insights from vast amounts of semi-structured and unstructured social media data to enable informed and insightful decision-making" (p. 167). For social media, Waite and Perez-Vega (2018) suggested metrics related to online consumer engagement, which include steps related to involvement, interaction, intimacy, and influence (ch. 10). Key metrics for involvement are impressions, followers or subscribers, and likes. Comments are an important metric for interaction, while intimacy is measured by sentiment ratios. It is important that PUC foster some influencers, as well, because this will assist with both retention of current students and attraction of potential students.

Some tools for extracting insightful social media data include Lexalytics, Twitonomy, and Netlytic (Sponder & Kahn, 2018, p. 180). Lexalytics is a natural language processor that can be used to conduct sentiment analysis, categorization, and intention detection (Lexalytics, 2023). Twitonomy offers similar features focused on the Twitter social media platform (Twitonomy, 2023), while Netlytic is a text and social network analyzer for studying public discourse (Netlytic, 2023).

Mobile Metrics

Mobile is another area to consider for digital analytics. Jantsch (2018) suggests considering metrics such as screen size, network speed, and device type, which are all captured

as part of Google Analytics (Mobile Analytics, 0:24). Two other useful tools are UXCam and Flurry, which each offers insight into user experience and behaviors on mobile apps (UXCam, 2023).

Digital Marketing Components

As noted earlier, a strong digital marketing campaign will consider eight areas: website content, search engine optimization, search and display marketing, social media marketing, video marketing, email marketing, content marketing, and mobile marketing (Batesole, 2018). In this section, each of these areas are considered in the context of PUC's digital marketing strategy.

Website content

An organization's website is the heart of its digital strategy. According to Batesole (2018), "An effective website is simple, well thought out, and highly functional. It should be intuitive and eliminate any and all barriers so your visitor can accomplish their goals effortlessly" (What makes a website effective? 1:25). PUC's existing website already does a good job of speaking to the three core audiences, but continuous effort must be made to keep it current and fresh.

Search engine optimization

Search engine optimization is "the set of techniques used to improve a website's ranking" on search results pages (Sponder & Kahn, 2018, p. 24). When someone uses a search engine to look up a particular word or phrase, an algorithm determines which web pages appear on the results page and the order in which they appear (Batesole, 2018, How SEO works). According to Batesole (2018), a website must be accessible to search engine crawlers, and the text on the page should be relevant to the user searching for a specific term or phrase (Essential optimization techniques). As the dominant search engine, Google and its search algorithm must be considered

when doing search engine optimization (StatCounter, 2023), and optimization is never really finished because the algorithm constantly evolves (Batesole, 2018, Essential optimization techniques).

Search and display marketing

Search engine marketing is the term used to describe ads that are displayed on a search results page, while display ads are graphical messages placed on other websites with content (Batesole, 2018, Introduction to search and display). They can be targeted geographically, demographically, and psychographically, and can be set to appear on search results or content pages with specific keywords. Momen, et al. (2019) found that search engine marketing correlated with brand image for higher education, but that display marketing did not demonstrate a similar correlation. Because of this, PUC should focus on search engine advertising, determining appropriate keywords to target, and avoid investment in display advertising.

Social media marketing

One of the most common mistakes organizations make is not adapting their communication strategies to social media (Bucea-Manea-Tonis & Gurgu, 2018), which requires a significant shift in tactics from traditional one-to-many marketing plans (Waite & Perez, 2018, ch. 7). Higher education, in particular, must think strategically about its use of social media, in no small part due to the fluency of two of its audiences who grew up using it (Briggs, 2022; Wong et al., 2022).

There are two aspects to using social media: posts and conversations within an organization's social media profiles, and advertising placed on users social feeds (Batesole, 2018, Building a social media marketing plan). Social media advertising is an opportunity to

control the message and show it to specific geographic and demographic groups, but done right social media posts have more power to build an organization's brand.

One mistake frequently made is removing negative comments. But Bucea-Manea-Tonis and Gurgu (2018) found, "Negative comments can be an opportunity to increase the company's reputation. ... By keeping negative comments, the company demonstrates its honesty [and] its ability to correct its mistakes" (p. 38). And Wong, et al. (2022) stated, "Social media marketing offers higher education an effective and viral marketing tool that can offer multitudes of benefits. They can be leveraged to create and boost branding, drive recruitment, engage stakeholders, and attract business leads" (p. 128).

Video marketing

Video marketing uses video content produced by an organization and distributes it via platforms like YouTube, Vimeo, Facebook, and Twitter. Batesole (2018) pointed out that YouTube is the second largest search engine, making it valuable "for driving brand awareness and traffic to your website" (The impact of video marketing, 0:26). They went on to say:

Video marketing can be used to show off your location, your products, or even help customers through their buying decision. You might make a video to tell your brand's story or create your own commercial and use it to advertise on top of related content.

(The impact of video marketing, 0:29)

PUC has done a good job of generating video content and posting it regularly, and it is a powerful medium for evoking emotion while sharing the expanse of the campus.

Email marketing

Email continues to be a valuable channel for marketing communications. Today, the prevalence of spam has reduced the ability for organizations to cold email potential customers,

but, as Batesole (2018) stated, “many customers welcome [email] communication from brands they already interact with, just like our own acceptance and use of snail mail coupons from businesses we frequent” (Understanding email marketing, 0:38). Email allows an organization to regularly initiate communication with prospects and existing customers who have previously opted in to receiving such email. Even though use of email by college-aged adults is significantly lower than previous generations, it is still consistently used by 80% of Gen Z (Edson, 2022), making it a useful communication tool for PUC once a potential student has initiated engagement with the college. It is also particularly useful for maintaining contact with the institution’s donor base.

Content marketing

Content marketing is the creation of articles and media relevant to potential customers to drive brand awareness and generate revenue (Batesole, 2018, What is content marketing?). Because good content is valuable to customers, content marketing is an opportunity to influence potential customers by offering such valuable content. PUC might consider identifying topics of interest to potential students and crafting relevant content that offers value. This has the potential to build the PUC brand and drive recruitment efforts.

Mobile marketing

Adoption of mobile devices has become widespread, with over 95% of Americans carrying mobile devices (Batesole, 2018, The mobile marketing landscape). According to Wong, et al. (2022), critical mass and social influence were highly correlated with intention to use mobile apps. This offers an opportunity to PUC to use its mobile app to communicate marketing messages.

Analytics-Generating Initiatives

With this in mind, there are three initiatives which PUC could launch with the potential to help the institution achieve some of its goals. These are sentiment analysis, content marketing, and network analysis, each of which would use analytic data to improve marketing outcomes and lead to increased enrollment, higher student retention, and growth in donor volume.

Initiative 1: Sentiment Analysis

Over the last decade, PUC has dealt with one crisis after another, from a precipitous enrollment decline and faculty layoffs, to major forest fires encroaching on the campus, to, of course, the Covid-19 pandemic and its related campus shutdown in 2020. The accreditation body has questioned the long-term viability of the school (Studley, 2020), which has contributed to a downward spiral of public sentiment toward the institution. Because of this, an ongoing program of sentiment analysis could help the communication and marketing teams better craft messaging about the institution, leading to better outcomes and goal achievement.

Sentiment analysis uses natural language processing “to extract attitudinal information from a piece of text” (Sponder & Kahn, 2018, p. 250). This can be used to process social media posts to determine public sentiment about PUC. While there are some free text analytics platforms, such as MeaningCloud, Dandelion API, and PINGAR API, to launch a sentiment analysis initiative better results are likely using a paid tool, such as IBM SPSS, Lexalytics, or RevealedContext (Spondor & Kahn, 2018, p. 249). Once relevant keywords and hashtags are identified, matching social posts can be processed. By time-blocking these posts, one will be able to see shifts in sentiment over time. Once the dominant emotions are identified, a communication strategy can be developed to shift public sentiment, improving the school’s reputation and leading to improved recruitment of new students and an increase in financial contributions.

Initiative 2: Network Analysis

Network analysis is the second proposed initiative. Social media as we know it today is a relatively new phenomenon, using asynchronous computer communication technology to support and develop social connections. However, social networks themselves are not new. At creation itself, God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone” (New American Standard Bible, 2020, Gen. 2:18), and in the thousands of years since creation humans have arranged themselves into social structures with their own cultures, languages, and relationships. Christakis (2010) supported the idea of “social network” having been around a long time, stating, “Human beings have been assembling [social networks] for hundreds of thousands of years, ever since we emerged from the African Savannah” (0:28-0:35). He goes on to describe “friendship and co-worker and sibling and relative relationships with other people, who in turn have similar relationships with other people, and this spreads out endlessly into a distance—and you get a network” (Christakis, 2010, 0:36-0:46).

A premise of network analysis is that the arrangement of the network, and how the adjacent nodes interact, is just as important as the network itself (Sponder & Kahn, 2018, p. 313). Christakis (2010) described a simple method of identifying more central nodes in a social network, individuals who are more centrally connected within the network. They used it to predict the movement of an epidemic through a population, but PUC could use a similar methodology to identify the influencers in the social networks of potential students. By asking each prospective student to provide the name of one other person who is also looking at colleges, statistically this adjacent person will be more likely to be central to the network. PUC could then put enhanced effort into recruiting these students, with the expectation that these more central

individuals will have outsized influence on the network, leading to incremental increases in enrollment.

Similarly, donors could be asked the name of one person in their network who should be contacted about supporting PUC. Again, statistically these adjacent relationships are likely to be more centrally located in the network, and could then be targets of focused fundraising communication. If these individuals become donors, they are likely to influence others to also join in supporting the institution financially, leading to incremental gains in donation income.

Initiative 3: Content Marketing

Content marketing is the third and final proposed initiative. As mentioned in the previous section, content marketing is the development and publishing of articles and video relevant to potential customers (Batesole, 2018, What is content marketing?). Because people value good content, content marketing is an opportunity to influence potential students and donors by offering such valuable content.

To launch a content marketing initiative, PUC should begin by looking at Google Analytics data from its primary website, identifying the keywords and target pages leading to information requests and subsequent enrollment. Content should then be developed based on these keywords. For example, if “Northern California college” is a keyword leading to conversion, several articles about colleges in Northern California could be written, highlighting the benefits of the region in general—and PUC in particular—for educational and career opportunities. Once these keywords are identified from Google Analytics, a subsequent keyword analysis should be done with Google Keyword Planner to identify similar keywords that could also become the basis of other articles. Search engine optimization techniques should be applied to these articles to gain placement in organic listings. In addition, search engine advertising could

target these same keywords, driving traffic to this same content. Every page should have a strong call to action to drive conversion to information requests.

A similar process should be used for the audience of financial supporters. In this case, keywords related to estate planning and other donor topics could become the basis for articles, with strong calls to action inviting visitors to become financial supporters. In addition to written articles, the best performing content should also be developed into videos, using similar keyword strategies.

Conclusion

Pacific Union College has had a tough run over the last decade, but has a strong strategic plan driving toward a bright future. An online marketing plan can support these change efforts in an attempt to drive new student enrollment, retention of current students, and the support of financial donors. Sentiment analysis, network analysis, and content marketing are three initiatives that can be used to drive the mission forward and help achieve the institution's goals.

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