Imagine for a moment you are standing in a wide, open field in the middle of a heavy downpour. Raindrops are swirling all around you, whipped in a thousand directions by forces unseen by you. You've been asked to collect these raindrops for a particular event—the trick is you have only a colander and the drops slip through faster than you can reach them. Welcome to the world of marketing to commuter students. Each one of those drops is a student that slips onto campus and off again before you have time to blink.
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Commuter students are showing up on campuses across the country more frequently than ever before. This is due, in part, to a number of different factors that vary from campus to campus. But generally speaking, the increasing popularity of commuter college over the years, the rise of college costs such as room and board, family priorities and a number of older students returning to the classroom have all contributed to the growing commuter student population. Universities and college campuses across the country have

exist, like family, friends, jobs, etc., also effect how we market our events to commuter students. Most residential students do not have those unseen forces pressuring them on a daily basis. And, as if we didn’t have enough to battle, here’s more. Recently, one television network reported we are all exposed to more than 5,000 messages a day! The deluge of those advertisements, along with the unseen forces of students’ lives, can make marketing to commuter students seem almost as impossible as catching raindrops in a colander.

Remember that some events need promotion well in advance so commuter students can make plans to attend.

long recognized the increase in their commuter student population. One need only enter “commuter students” in an Internet search engine and dozens of different offices, orientations and associations pop up for these students at campuses throughout the nation. It’s encouraging to see so many available resources for commuter students!

But how to market those resources, specifically your programs and events, in an effective manner can sometimes send even the most inventive programmers into a creative drought. Commuter students have always been a difficult audience to reach. With their mobility, it is easier for them to come and go as they please, making it much harder to pin them down, therefore increasing the likelihood they might miss out on all of your wonderful and enriching events.

Wayne State University (MI) has long struggled with that dilemma. As a primarily commuter institution with more than 33,000 students, less than 5% of our student population lives on campus. Most live down river, up north, east side, west side, downtown—you name it! With our target audience scattered across three counties and dispersed among millions of people, it creates some unique challenges when marketing and promoting our events. Through trial and error, we have found that searching for effective ways to publicize events to this almost entirely mobile campus—not easy to do, we might add, in the Motor City (Detroit)!

But mobility is only half the problem. Remember those unseen forces we mentioned earlier? Yep, that’s the other half. Those forces we do not see but know

But don’t panic yet. Now that we’ve caught a glimpse of the challenges and difficulties of marketing to commuter students, let’s look at some advertising techniques that have worked at Wayne State University that might be helpful in catching the attention of your own commuter population.

Getting Into Character

Several years ago, the WSU Student Council Program Board (SCPB) showed Spiderman as part of its movie series. One of the methods they used to catch the attention of this always-on-the-move population was to have a member dress up in a Spiderman outfit and stand at a busy campus intersection holding a poster bearing information such as the film’s date, time and location. This technique might require the most enthusiastic member of the team to act a little silly, but it will definitely get some attention. The trick to this type of promotion is to rely on plain gimmickry. The sillier the gimmick, the more likely it will be remembered. Have your committee analyze each movie or event, identify the most recognizable image related to the event and play off that image.

Executing Theme Week Promotions

Every school has them—theme weeks! One of WSU’s annual traditions is Wayne Winter Week, which falls during the second week of February. It is programmed around a particular theme designed to beat the winter blues. Past examples have included Flashback to the ’70s, Blue Hawaii, Wild Wild West, Fiesta Caliente, etc. From the music to publicity and promotion, everything pertains to the theme.

When you’re promoting a specific theme week, be sure to incorporate the theme into every promotional piece. For example, for the Blue Hawaii theme, we erected a Tiki hut around a literature table at a high-traffic corner in the Student Center. We attached leis to copies of the week’s schedules and distributed them to students. The unusual display combined with a giveaway item was an instant attention grabber and served us well in promoting the week’s events (as did the Jimmy Buffet music in the background). Then during the week, we gave out shirts bearing the week’s schedule, along with flyers and printed schedules.

Targeting Promotional Efforts

One of the first lessons we learn as programmers is that not every program appeals to all students. On a diverse campus like Wayne State University, there are many different types of students who make up our commuter student population. One of our most successful promotional efforts has involved focusing on a particular audience. For example, bringing in an event such as Mary Lightfinne: Nurses Without Borders would most likely get more attention from students in the nursing, pharmacy and medical colleges. According, the SCPB sent out letters to these colleges’ senate boards and made sure they were invited to the program. Of course, other students might find this event interesting, too. However, the event is likely to be more appreciated by individuals who are interested in choosing a related major.

Working with Other Raindrops

Giving other student organizations a chance to co-sponsor your event will provide additional promotional benefits, as well. The co-sponsoring organization will have their own members and contact lists, and the information can be disseminated through yet another avenue. But even if you are co-sponsoring with other organizations, you should also deliver an event flyer to every student organization’s mailbox. These groups will generally share the information on your flyers during their meetings.

Using Quarter-Page Flyers

Quarter-page flyers have worked very well at WSU because commuter students have limited space in which to store flyers. Most get stuffed into a backpack and never
Working with the Campus Newspaper

Utilize your campus newspaper. Build relationships between your organization and the newspaper staff. If given enough advance notice about events, some newspapers are also willing to write articles about upcoming programs, such as lectures, bands and novelties, etc. Having the newspaper write an article about your program will help stretch your advertising budget. If the editorial staff is not able to cover your event ahead of time, volunteer to write an article yourself. Depending on how your school newspaper is managed, you might be able to submit an article about your upcoming program as a contributing writer. At the very least, give the paper a press release containing enough details to create a basic article.

Displaying Banners in the Student Union/Cafeteria

Create colorful, unique banners advertising your event and place them in the cafeteria, food court or commons area. This is a great marketing tool because people can read them while eating their meals. Remember to keep the information on the banners simple and easy to understand. Table tents are also a great idea for cafeterias or food courts. They are easy to produce and give students information as they grab a quick bite.

Harnessing the Power of E-mail

At Wayne State University, students receive a weekly e-mail from the dean of students called the "Warrior Net News." It gives them regular reminders of all special events on campus. Since most commuter students rely heavily on e-mail to communicate with professors, classmates, etc., this form of marketing is convenient for them. They can download the information to a PDA (personal digital assistant), print it or forward it to friends before deciding to participate.

Another great idea is to create a Listserv for students who already attend your events. It can be used whenever you need to send e-mails about upcoming events. Depending on the browser you are using, you can also program a Listserv to conduct surveys that will give you an opportunity to learn more about your audience. Having useful knowledge about your students and their schedules will help steer you into the right direction when promoting your events.

Getting onto Web Pages

We promote WSU events on a number of different Web sites. We work hand-in-hand with the university marketing department to publicize our events on the Wayne State home page. If you pursue this approach, keep in mind that while not every event is always worthy of being on the main page, you can work with your marketing department to determine the best course of action.

WSU also uses the Campus Pipeline System for students, faculty and staff. Through it, individuals can log on to check grades, register, pay tuition, check their e-mail and find a syllabus, along with a number of other features. Within this system is an area to post promotional snippets about upcoming programs and events. These postings are linked to individual Web sites providing detailed information about the events. It is usually possible to incorporate an e-mail address so interested persons can contact us directly about events. We used this during the summer to publicize a Red Cross blood drive. About 30 minutes after
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the posting, we began receiving e-mails and calls about the drive. It’s a great tool that can be effective immediately.

Singing in the Rain—or At Least in the Hallways

Throughout the corridor of the Student Center at WSU, student organizations and university departments may reserve literature tables for use in promoting their respective events, programs, etc. When the SCPB conducted Wayne Idol (a takeoff on American Idol) singing auditions, the committee decided to get creative with the literature tables by recording some of its own members trying to sing. The recorded scenes were then played at the literature tables as a "reject tape." This served as a very effective marketing tool for Wayne Idol because it created interest in the event while giving students a good laugh.

Stretching Your Imagination

No matter what event you're trying to promote to commuters, you've got to stretch your imagination. Let your committee members pour out ideas and splash in the pools of creativity. Give your organization an opportunity to brainstorm and think of ways to capture the attention of your always-mobile students. It might take a little more concentration and time, but it is possible to develop successful promotional methods that will reach your target audience.

Remember that some events need promotion well in advance so commuter students can make plans to attend. Those unseen forces that ebb and flow throughout their lives make spur-of-the-moment activities difficult to attend.

As more and more commuter students populate our college campuses, it's important that programmers adapt to meet their needs. So, through your publicity and promotion, encourage students to step into the rain of campus life where they can soak up all your wonderful programs and events.

About the Authors

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