

Social Networking Goes Abroad

WHEN JOANNE KRAMB, MEMBER RELATIONS AND MARKETING OFFICER at the International Student Exchange Program (ISEP), was redesigning the organization's marketing plan, she distributed a survey to students and not surprisingly, found that their favorite Web site was Facebook. She approached her coworkers with the idea of creating an ISEP group on the site and found that they were on both sides of the argument. Many were apprehensive about creating a group because students would essentially be allowed to post information at will. Others were encouraging and wanted to give it a try. After much discussion, ISEP decided to create a group on Facebook and see what might happen. Now, after only a few months, the ISEP group boasts nearly 1,000 members and communication through the group site is quickly replacing telephone and e-mail inquiries, according to Kramb. "It's more informal for students and they feel more comfortable sending a message on Facebook," noted Kramb. Since the explosion of social networking sites on the Internet, these types of exchanges between students, study abroad advisers, and study abroad providers have become increasingly commonplace.



A Brave New Virtual World

Social networking sites are virtual communities for people interested in a particular subject or just to "hang out" together. Members communicate by voice, chat, instant message, videoconference, and blogs, and the service typically provides a way for members to contact friends of other members. Some current sites include Xanga, Ringo, Bebo, Where Are You Now (WAYN), Friendster, The Froghouse, and the most popular among college students, Facebook and MySpace. Within the past few years, Facebook and MySpace have become an ordinary part of the lives of college students around the United States and increasingly, around the globe. Looking at the numbers says it all. According to comScore Media Matrix, of the near 20 million unique visitors ages 18–24 on the Internet worldwide, more than 50 percent visit MySpace and more than 25 percent visit Facebook. While Facebook's popularity remains primarily in the United States ranking tenth and only 39th globally, MySpace ranks strongly on both levels, as the third

most popular site in the United States and sixth most popular Internet site in the world, as noted by Alexa Internet, Inc. in their ranking of top U.S. sites.



Opportunities to Interact and Learn

For education abroad advisers, these sites are generating exciting new opportunities to interact with and learn about students. Communication on a number of levels can occur with students, both directly and indirectly. Advisers can proactively search for students or simply be available on the sites by having an individual or office profile. Although there are countless ways these sites are being used, creating common interest groups, posting upcoming events, and advertising are the most popular options being used by those in the field.



How does it work? A user must first register with Facebook. In this process, one creates an account with an e-mail address and birthday. The next step is to join a regional network (by entering your city and state), a college and/or work network. At this point a profile can be created which might include photos of the individual user or an entire staff. Now, the user is ready to begin interacting with the Facebook community. My Space involves a similar process to get started, where a user registers before creating a profile that may include a variety of information, photos, music and even video.

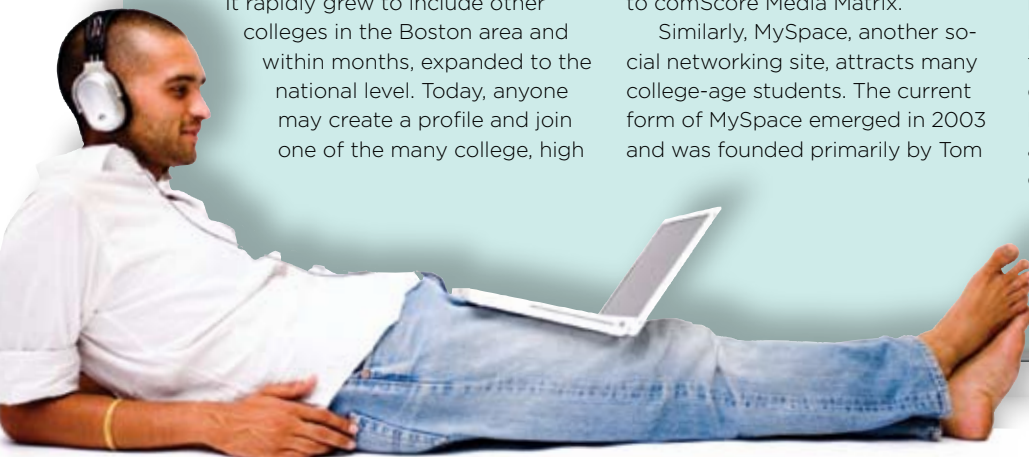
Creating a common interest group on either Facebook or MySpace is one of the most popular features being used by education abroad advisers. Groups can be created to connect students with a common interest and once established many other features become available for communication. For instance, groups can be created for students interested in studying abroad, those going on a particular program, for returning participants, or all of the above to meet and inter-

act. At Marymount University, the Office of Study Abroad has created a group called "MU Global" not only to share general information on study abroad and the office, but also to link returning education abroad students with current or prospective students. Students may contact a returning student at the click of a mouse for each of Marymount's program sites. "The student-to-student connection seems to work the best on our campus and this (Facebook) seems to be a great outlet for this," said Rebecca Poznick, study abroad coordinator at Marymount University. The adviser of a group may determine who can view or join the group, remove members, edit content on the site, send messages to all members of a group at once (Facebook) or post a topic or bulletin for all to see (MySpace). The group feature can also be set to allow members to send a message to the group en masse, add important information to the group profile, invite or remove members, and edit any content posted by a member. While other groups such

Primer on the History of Facebook and MySpace

Facebook exploded onto the college scene in 2004 and has become an important networking and socializing tool for today's students. The site was created by former Harvard student Mark Zuckerberg as a way for Harvard students to communicate and interact with each other online. It rapidly grew to include other colleges in the Boston area and within months, expanded to the national level. Today, anyone may create a profile and join one of the many college, high school, company, military, or geographic networks. The site now boasts over twelve million registered visitors and it continues to grow. From July to December 2006, there has been approximately a 75 percent increase in daily reach for Facebook, showing that this is still a growing site, according to comScore Media Matrix.

Similarly, MySpace, another social networking site, attracts many college-age students. The current form of MySpace emerged in 2003 and was founded primarily by Tom Anderson and Chris DeWolfe. The site was created to allow users to post information about themselves and interact with other users. MySpace has been recently estimated to be worth six billion dollars and the number of profiles expected by the end of 2006 topped 200 million (as reported in the November 2006 issue of *Advertising Age*). Facebook and MySpace dominate the world of social networking sites on the Internet and millions of college students around the country and world have and continue to create profiles.



PHOTOS: ISTOCKPHOTO. FROM LEFT: SHELLY PERRY; N/A; JASON STITT; DAN WILTON

By browsing some of the student created sites, advisers can view complaints, compliments, or concerns that they might not otherwise receive. This can be utilized to better understand students' needs and to serve them better in the future.

as “VCU International Education,” “Barcelona Study Abroad 2006” and “International Education” have been created by education abroad offices and companies, the majority of education abroad-related groups on MySpace (121 groups) and Facebook (439 groups) are student-created.

Looking at student-created groups undoubtedly provides an opportunity for education abroad professionals to learn more about the students they serve. Students perhaps might

not want to share the same information on an official site as they would on a student-based site. By browsing some of the student created sites, advisers can view complaints, compliments, or concerns that they might not otherwise receive. This can be utilized to better understand students' needs and to serve them better in the future. For example, if a student complains about an aspect of a program, advisers can choose to explore the situation in more detail, take a survey from other participants, and investigate how to improve the situation for future participants.

Sometimes students are just looking for information that advisers can readily supply. For example, a student named “Julia” asks for advice on what to pack in the “Florence Italy Study Abroad 2006–2007” group site on MySpace. Advisers could post suggestions directly to the site, prepare a list for distribution during education abroad orientation, directly contact the student, or include the information in future publications.

Marketing and Advertising

In addition to utilizing the group feature on Facebook and MySpace to reach students, education abroad advisers and companies

are using the sites for a variety of advertising-related purposes. Through paid advertisements, groups, creating events, and sending messages to individuals and groups, these sites make it convenient to spread the word to students efficiently and inexpensively. “We are always looking to reach the ideal target market, and pretty much every student is online. These sites do a great job at targeting their audiences,” said Stephen Down, media and international marketing manager for the Career Education Corporation, who advertises for American Intercontinental University’s (AIU) London Study Abroad Program.

Paid advertisements are one way that MySpace and Facebook allow education abroad advisers and companies to reach students through banner ads, virtual flyers, and sponsored links with some options being very inexpensive. Through Facebook, for example, 10,000 virtual flyers will be shown to an advertiser’s target audience for only \$5.00, making it possible for offices and companies with the smallest marketing budgets to reach a large audience. In addition to paid options, both sites provide several free ways to advertise. Creating an event is one popular advertising method that education abroad advisers employ frequently. Using the event feature to announce upcoming events and programs allows advisers to invite participants, give important details about the event, and even gather an RSVP list. The University of Wisconsin-La Crosse used this feature to spread the word on Facebook about their upcoming “Study Abroad

Expo” listing the date, time, location and other important details about the event. Students were able to ask questions on the event site, RSVP, and even find out information about the office if they were unable to attend the event. Another method of advertising events and programs is by simply sending a message to individual students or to a group on either site. Members of an entire group can be sent a message via Facebook, while MySpace allows members to post a discussion topic or bulletin that all members can view, or instant message other group members.

Another way that these sites can be used for advertising purposes is for publicity. When searching for photos and quotes from students’ education abroad experiences, many can be found through MySpace or Facebook. While a student’s permission should be gained before posting a photo or quote, these sites can be a goldmine when creating publicity. Students are able to create blogs and photo albums dealing with their education abroad experiences. However, some advisers

are wary of seeking out students through these sites for fear of discovering evidence of unsavory behavior or damaging comments within the students’ postings. It is this risk that has many education abroad professionals

approaching social networking sites with suspicion and apprehension.

Communication in a Truly Public Space

With stories being regularly posted in the news of students participating in inappropriate, risky, or even illegal behavior, it is easy to understand why some advisers are concerned about utilizing these sites. “It is fairly clear that the quest of an authentic,





unedited, unrestricted student voice assumes some risk (unsatisfied participants, applicants, etc). Depending upon their sentiments it is also a potential challenge to institutional

communications,” states Gordon Schaeffer, senior analyst with the University of California Education Abroad Programs. Barbara Lindeman, director of study abroad at the University of Missouri-Columbia, echoes the sentiments of a worried colleague, “What if they trash a host family based on a personality conflict?”

So, not everyone believes that visiting student profiles and groups is a good idea. Some advisers like to maintain a distance between themselves and student groups and profiles. “When we first went on Facebook and were looking at the profiles of current study abroad students, I had some thoughts

of, ‘He’s doing what in Thailand?’ and at first felt like I was invading their privacy,” said Emily Gorlewski, program assistant for cosponsored study abroad

and exchange programs at Northern Illinois University. “But then I thought, students need to realize that their information is in a public space and that we can see what they post.”

Catherine Orr, events and publications coordinator for the Office of International Education at the University of Richmond, agrees. “The presence of academics and student affairs offices on such a venue can be greatly positive as it will serve as a direct reminder to students that they should think carefully about how they want to represent themselves to not only their friends, but to a much larger, unlimited audience.” Although it is still being debated

whether these sites are an asset, liability, or both, there is no denying their importance in the world of today’s students.

Colleges and universities around the country have responded to these social networking sites in a variety of ways, from embracing the exciting new possibilities they hold to regarding them with a deep skepticism. While arguments for both the benefits and risks of Facebook will continue to be voiced, there is no denying that these types of social networking sites are not disappearing any time soon. As Kramb succinctly points out, “It’s the hottest thing on campuses right now. There is only so much you can do to bring students to you and then you have to go where they are.” **IE**

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