

## ***The Web Advantage: CE's Toolbox for Education, Marketing and Operations***

October 9, 2002

**Brown University and Rhode Island School of Design, co-hosts  
Providence, RI**

Our fall Professional Development Day began with a keynote address by Dr. Patricia Brown, Director, Distance Learning and Continuing Education at Mass General Hospital's Institute for Health Professions. Dr. Brown noted that trends and forecasts indicate that possibly one-third of private colleges will close by 2010, but that demand for education will increase by 5 million students in that same period. Competition from large, for-profit, virtual universities will have a great impact on this trend. Referring to Sam Dunn's work, *The Virtualizing of Education, 2000-2025*, Dr. Brown said that: space and time boundaries will disappear; courses will be accessible 24/7/365; educational institutions will become increasingly specialized; educational institutions will either be providers or certifiers of learning and credits; the value of official accreditation will diminish with the focus on self-directed learning; eventually, 95% of coursework will contain digital enhancements; gen-ed courses will be released on large scale and "managed" by faculty facilitators; colleges will merge and form consortia; and the educational continuum from high school to graduate education will become more seamless. All of these trends, and their basis in web-based technologies, will force educators and institutions to adapt constantly to the changing forces, and to conform marketing and operations strategies with the educational changes.

Three breakout sessions followed the morning keynote:

### **Marketing, Branding, Student Recruitment and Retention**

By Pat Brinegar, Session Recorder

According to Robert Baron, Information Technology Executive at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, usability determines the success of a website. Usability provides comfort and simplicity in order to allow the user to get quickly to the "right stuff," without making the user "think." A website has about 8-20 seconds to get the user's attention, so the webmaster has to think and adapt like a "provider."

The website should make you look like an expert. If the visitors like the site there are far fewer drop-offs. Visitors therefore return to the site and make recommendations to others to visit. The site then stands apart from others. Overall considerations for the web page include navigation, wording, loading, speed, layout, dimensions, graphics and consistency. Usability testing is very useful in order to see how people can successfully use the site and to determine if any changes are needed. Multi-media components like sound files, flash files, and film clips do not add value unless they are part of the program. The user's scenario is to try to screen out, so the website should fine-tune itself by seeking clues: Are you a new student? Are you interested in financial aid? Reduce the time the user has to spend on the site and make the visit easier. Common set features are user I.D. and Search Function (either a listing or subject guide like that of Amazon.com.) Don't make extra steps. If using a privacy statement and other legal statements, explain what you will do with the information that is requested.

"Hidden" links are time-consuming, and are like trying to find a hidden door. Provide effective use of icons, buttons, graphics. Website usability elements also include: colors, layout, graphics, texts/fonts, appropriate language, tense consistency, addressing the visitors either informally or formally, serious or light, while maintaining consistency throughout. Replication of scrolling instructions is useful on each page rather than just once at the beginning. Note Amazon.com where every page tells you what to do next.

In terms of navigation, the site should provide comfort, visibility of next step, back step options, icons/buttons/graphics, shape, size, graphic meaning, color, and "fly-by-night."

Brian Williams, Associate Dean of Enrollment Management at Providence College, noted that in terms of acceptance, it took 46 years for 25% of the population in America to use electricity, 35 years for 25% of the population to use the telephone, and only 4 years for 25% of the population to use the internet. The need to shift to web-based recruitment and marketing is clear.

Technology also allows for personalized responses to many individuals, if it is used wisely and if tracking is kept up to date. Computers can store vast amounts of data and analyze patterns, and act on these patterns on a mass scale, thus using personalized approaches like letters and follow-up phone calls to provide the "right message at the right time."

When using technology in recruitment, we must remember that students are accustomed to a high level of site service and sophistication, because for them it is a "way of life." As in all forms of communication, we must keep the audience in mind as we prepare our message.