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# The \$117 Billion College Market: Making a Student Connection

BY MARC SOREL  
& ROSANNA BELL

**T**oday's college students represent a lucrative demographic. Enrollment is on the rise and this year, college students control a massive \$404 billion in total spending power, including \$117 billion in discretionary purchasing and \$287 billion in non-discretionary spending.<sup>1</sup> College students not only have considerable direct purchasing power, but they also have significant influence over others' spending habits.

Ski resorts and other companies looking to increase clientele and bring vitality and diversity to the slopes should focus on the college market. But how can companies attract the attention of this elusive demographic? First, it is important to understand the college mindset and how to create a compelling marketing campaign that resonates with them. The media-saturated youth have countless advertisements vying for their attention, so it is extremely critical to infiltrate their space—both on and offline—in engaging ways.

Many companies understand the necessity of having a social media presence when advertising to youth but fail to understand the goal of social media marketing. They think about social media success as amassing a large number of fans or followers, but they don't always realize that interaction and brand-consumer engagement matters more.

Blake Chandlee, vice president of global partnerships at Facebook, expressed a similar view of how brands should not sacrifice quality content for the sake of increased fans: "It's not about the size of the community. It's how engaged that community is and how that aligns with the brand's strategy.... We do believe that people's best customers should be their fans.... But it's not about getting more fans than your competitor because that's a chase to the bottom and, at the end of the day, the quality of those fans gets impacted."<sup>2</sup>

Producing quality content that piques students' interest and stimulates



discussion will greatly enhance your social media marketing campaigns. One way to do this is by encouraging "co-creation"—user-generated content that helps shape brand image—through the use of contests. This powerful marketing tool emotionally invests people in your company, because they are contributing creative content themselves. They become part of the brand instead of passive onlookers.

Youth especially value co-creation as they are digital natives that believe in the power of self-expression and connectivity. Inviting them to co-create with your company gives voice to their personal brand experience and individual stories, which they then get to share with others.

As much as youth value communicating online, face-to-face interaction and peer-to-peer marketing channels remain relevant. In order to successfully reach college students, ski areas need to access students' space and engage directly with their target audience. College students are notoriously wary of traditional advertising; ski resorts can break down those barriers and foster trust among students by using peer-to-peer marketing to advertise on college campuses. Students will typically trust their fellow peers over corporate advertising, especially when student brand ambassadors show genuine enthusiasm. This gives your campaign a human element and demonstrates authenticity.

Since brand ambassadors have such a significant role and ultimately determine the success of your peer-to-peer marketing campaign, it is important that they truly are passionate and knowledgeable about skiing and your resort. If you hire a person who's never experienced the adrenaline of surging down the slopes or the serene beauty of the snowy mountains from a ski lift, that's going to show and will turn people away due to the lack of credibility.

It is also important to hire brand ambassadors who are highly networked on campus. This will extend reach and ensure the word is spread across diverse communities.

Having a vast network of brand ambassadors nationwide and a management system in place to work with, train, and motivate student representatives will

increase the viability and success of your on-campus marketing campaign. Simply hiring students without giving them direction, support, and a community of fellow ambassadors with which to bond will not work. Make sure to have these systems in place—or find a college marketing company that does—before beginning to advertise on college campuses.

The college audience is a niche market but a market worth investing in nonetheless. College students are highly impressionable and reaching them during these formative years can turn them into lifelong customers. They make excellent advocates and have strong influence over other generations. Connect with students and see your industry grow! ■

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*advertising innovations in the college and youth marketing arena. Rosanna Bell is the senior liaison and content marketing specialist for NAM. Sorel will be a featured presenter at the NSAA Winter Conferences in Steamboat Springs, Colorado, January 21–23, 2014, and subsequently at Mount Snow, Vermont, February 4–5.*

<sup>1</sup> "Refuel: Tech-Savvy College Students Are Gathering Gadgets, Saying Yes to Showrooming and Rejecting Second-Screening." *Globe Newswire*. Crux Research. June 13, 2013. Web. September 30, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> McMains, Andrew. "Social Media Reach Helps, But Quality Counts More: Quantity Is Not Enough for 4A's Panelists." *Adweek*. March 13, 2013. Web. March 24, 2013.



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