

Chapter 10

Using Stranger Small World Networks for E-Marketing in Academia

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ABSTRACT

In an institution of higher education, there are a number of projects that provide opportunities for online learning and collaboration. The success of a project often requires the participation of registered students, crowd-sourcing partners, Website visitors, and other types of virtual collaboration. To this end, many development teams use various forms of outreach to publicize the online degree, online credit course, short course, collaborative project, or call for project proposals (publication project). A common form of outreach involves the affordances of Social Web 2.0 connectivity: electronic marketing or e-marketing. The analysis of stranger small world networks enhances the efficacy of e-marketing endeavors by helping to identify individuals and social networks that may have a vested interest in a project; targeted outreach may enhance the low response rates from traditional “cold calls” and “break the ice” between people who may benefit from a bridge between each other’s social networks. Social network analysis may be applied to marketing to stranger social networks by helping a development team see which individuals and groups to target and what strategies to use—to expand the ties and capabilities of the development team and the university beyond known and familiar groups. This chapter includes some takeaway insights from the applied Social Network Analysis (SNA) and electronic SNA.

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INTRODUCTION

In an institution of higher education, cross-disciplinary development teams co-create online learning experiences for formal degree programs, for-credit courses, non-credit short courses, various crowd-sourced projects, and academic publications. After a project has been finalized, its success is often dependent on outreach to targeted individuals who may have an interest in the contents of the project. As part of the recent turn to data-driven decision-making and analytics, these teams would do well to create targeted public relations and marketing outreaches using (electronic) social network analysis. Further, it would benefit colleges and universities to reach out to various stranger small world networks to identify possible areas of shared interests and to officially “friend” those in stranger networks to extend the institutional reach. Electronic marketing (e-marketing) has smoothed the way to the diffusion of information through social networks, and a strategic approach may enhance the efficacy of such outreach.

In the age of Web 2.0, individuals are acculturated to higher levels of mediated interactivity and personal sharing. The research in crowd-sourcing and open-source work involves the structuring of shared work in a way to encourage collaborating between strangers. Various organizations encourage “likes” of their company on social networking sites because people’s attitudes affect whether they respond favorably to an organization. Social marketing has come to the fore with the emphasis on mediated relationships. The representation of a company in its logo and brand is highly protected for the same reasons. That attitude affects behaviors.

For all the sense of promise of social marketing, though, in reality, the response rates for cold calls are often low, as are the open calls for survey responses. Much work in crowd-sourcing involves

low wages and struggles with verifying the quality of the open-sourced for-pay work. Gaining entrée into stranger social networks is challenging and not very effective. However, tech-savvy individuals are also attuned to the many ways that socio-technical spaces (social networking spaces, virtual work spaces, and others) and information and communication technologies (ICT) may be compromised through the distribution of malware, spoofed websites, spear-phishing, malicious identity hacking, and other identity and information compromises. There is much less in the way of swift trust in initial interactions. Further, with the widespread use of spam to promote ideas, many gatekeepers to online communities and electronic mailing lists often maintain much higher standards of identity verification and information quality.

More often than not, development teams proceed with familiar social networks with pre-defined social paths. Many of the social interactions in academia are hierarchically based. Social ties are created by shared work experiences and prior interactions. There are protocols of who may request work and how, and generally, many of these endeavors are top-down. The sense that administrators, faculty, and staff in higher education protect their turf and areas of decision-making has a basis in fact. As in most social situations, people do not give over power or work portfolios (areas of responsibility or “turf”) easily. Further, many (all?) relationships are transactional and tactical; if there is an imbalance in the give-and-take, often, relationships will fail or end.

Degree, program and course development teams reach out to existing students and alumni with new course offerings, degree programs, and short course trainings. They tap their students to respond to open-source projects. They go with prior published authors to solicit works for new book projects. Going with the familiar may end up with reaffirming blind spots in decision-making. Traditional strategies have built outreaches around

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