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Jeff Kallay is the Experience Evangelist of the TargetX team and has toured 450 colleges and universities. He is on a mission to end the cliché of the walking backwards, scripted "tourbot" and is committed to helping his client campuses stage authentic, memorable and engaging campus visits that help schools reach their enrollment goals and connect with best fit students. His innovative campus visit work has been featured on the cover of *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and in *The New York Times*.

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PROLOGUE

Slaying the Campus Visit Vampire

by **Bob Johnson, President and CEO, Bob Johnson Consulting, LLC**

In fiction, vampires are difficult to destroy. Various means include dismemberment and burning, but authors are clever in finding new ways to bring them back to life. In some environments, some things just never die.

That's the thought that came to me on an early spring visit to the campus of a large Eastern university not long ago. The window of an upper floor in the room where I was about to do a presentation gave a marvelous view of intersecting campus walkways flanked by buildings old and new, complete with a statue of someone important in the early 19th-century life of the University. As I took in the

scene, around one corner and into the open area came a single person leading a crowd of 75 people. "That's one of our campus tours," explained my host.

The leader moved at a reasonably brisk pace, apparently chatting with two or three people at the head of the group while others gaggled and straggled along behind her. The leader then arrived near the statue, stood on a low stone wall, and began speaking about the august figure the statue represented. Her group gradually filled the space in front of her. And then, after a few minutes, off they went along the walkway.

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Apparently, I'm naïve: I didn't think tours of campuses like this happened any more. If you haven't yet been able to slay the campus visit vampire, this book has been written to help you do so.

Campus Visits in Today's Recruitment World

Campus visits remain an extraordinarily important step in a recruitment cycle. For many, a visit will determine whether or not they apply for admission. For others, returning for a second or a third visit helps them make a difficult final choice among two or three favorites.

No matter what someone expects as they arrive on your campus, a visit experience that doesn't meet and exceed the favorable impression they already have greatly reduces your chance of converting them from prospect to student.

The critical difference today compared to five or ten years ago is this: in the online world, people know far more about your campus before they visit than in the "good old days" when all they saw was your admissions viewbook and several online photos of campus buildings. Now, that's all changed.

This is the era of online stealth shopping. A campus visit now starts with a school's online presence months or even years before a prospect pulls into your parking lot in search of the admissions office. How well are campuses responding to this shift? Not as well as we might be, according to a Noel-Levitz (2007) report. The report reveals that 55 percent of traditional students took an online tour, up from 35 percent the previous year.

Of the other 45 percent, 66 percent said they "would (view an online tour) if they could." That last number suggests both potential and failure. The potential is for campuses to make a greater impact on students who use the Internet to explore possible college choices and use this experience to help them select colleges for live visits. The failure is that many institutions either don't offer online visits at all or make them difficult for campus Web site visitors to find and use.

This provides compelling evidence to create a strong online tour experience suitable to the interactive, personal nature of today's Web 2.0 communication environment. Many online tours do not take advantage of innovations made possible by greater broadband access to the Internet. But some do.

One of my favorite online tours is that of Mount Holyoke College in South Hadley, Massachusetts.¹ Several elements of the Mount Holyoke tour set it apart:

- The "tour" does not take people from one campus building to another, but instead introduces the students and faculty through text and video content.
- Visitors have options rather than a requirement to "start here" and follow the tour without knowing where it will lead or how long it will take. If a visitor's interest is primarily academics, they can choose to start with the "Learning" section. If their interest is campus life, they may choose to start with "Living Here."
- Visitors can link to various places within the online tour if they arrive at a place of

¹ See <www.mtholyoke.edu/cic/tour/>.

special interest and return to the tour as they please.

I strongly recommend that your campuses visit online tours such as this one and those of competitors, and take steps to ensure that your online visitors’ experiences are similar in quality to that of the competition.

No Place for a Village by Potemkin

In the Web 2.0 world, be especially careful that your online tour represents reality on your campus as closely as possible. While you don’t have to present everything that isn’t as effective as you’d like, be careful not to create an overly glamorous image that defies the conventions of “reality” marketing. That is, don’t set your campus up to disappoint live visitors. If your campus is near the banks of a majestic river that’s only visible from the top of the tallest campus building, you probably shouldn’t document it in your online tour as a feature of the campus; online visitors will expect to see the river when they arrive in person.

Assume that enterprising Millennial students and their parents will take advantage of resources about how to get the most out of a campus visit, including reviewing prior visitors’ comments or current student testimonials. Resources that prospects may access include are shown in Table 1.

Effective Aspects of Campus Visits

As you work to make your campus visit program as strong as possible, consider incorporating the following:

- Ensure that initial “curb appeal” gets things off to a fine start. Review the entrance to campus, the parking area, and the first step inside the door of your admissions office with fresh eyes and beautify as best you can. Keep glass doors clean, the shipping cartons for admissions materials out of sight, the waiting area comfortable, and the greeting friendly.
- Make both group and individual visits available at as many different times as possible. Group visits allow people to see who

TABLE 1. RESOURCES FOR PARENTS AND STUDENTS ON OPTIMIZING CAMPUS VISITS

Resource	URL	Comments
Petersons	www.petersons.com/common/article.asp?id=1647&path=ug.fas.advice&sponsor=1	Formal advice on how to plan a tour
College Board	www.collegeboard.com/student/csearch/college-visits/101.html	A Web page listing several tips on how to “Make the Most of Your Trip”
Princeton Review	www.princetonreview.com/college/college-visit.aspx	Informal advice
College Confidential	http://talk.collegeconfidential.com/visits/	A site that allows people to post comments on schools they have visited or attended
YouTube	www.youtube.com	Pay special attention to the videos that people are watching <i>most often</i>

else is interested in your school and offer initial anonymity to those visitors who prefer it. Later, an individual visit may become more appropriate. As much as possible, let potential students decide what's best for them.

- Offer personalized visits, if possible, because not everyone wants to see the Olympic-sized swimming pool or the new science labs. But don't make the offer if you can't fulfill it.
- Give your tour guides some room to "get real" about life on your campus.
- Tours are not as effective if guides sound like public relations people speaking from scripts. Provide clear, comprehensive scholarship and financial aid information that gives people an accurate idea of what your college will actually cost. Don't just explain how to calculate an "Expected Family Contribution" number that will shock and dismay prospects and their families.
- Get feedback about the visit before people leave campus, because it's still fresh and visitors are likely to respond more conscientiously.
- Follow up with everyone making a first visit soon after it's over and let them know you'll be glad to see them again whenever they want to return. Many people interested in your college will visit more than once, so they'll need the phone, e-mail, and IM address of an individual admissions counselor to do so.

These elements effectively serve both campuses and prospective students because they

foster positive, realistic impressions of the campus and offer the more individualized experience that today's students expect more than ever.

A Note about Parents

Wise and well-intentioned people have varying opinions about the role of parents of Millennial generation students in campus visits. My personal feeling is that formal programs designed to separate parents from their children during a campus visit go a step too far. From a marketing perspective, it seems best not to force people to do something they may not want to do.

However, it can be effective to allocate time during campus visits that is "especially for parents." The challenge is to provide content of value to that audience and to give people the choice of whether or not to attend. But if parents and their children want to sit in an admissions interview together during a visit, they should not be forced to separate.

"Early" Visitors

Some Web sites make it clear that campus visit programs are for juniors and seniors in high school. Sophomores aren't made welcome. That is a mistake. While relatively few high school sophomores will make campus visits the summer before their junior year, those who do should not be turned away from individual visits or made to feel that your formal program is not designed for them as well. Welcome them when they are ready. You may not have a second chance.

Create a Stronger Campus Visit Program

The chapters in this book reflect the experiences of people at a variety of colleges and universities who depend on successful campus visit programs to reach their enrollment goals each year. Together, they offer a splendid means to transform your campus visit program and make it as informative, entertaining, and productive as possible for both your campus and its visitors.