

4 Personalization Tips to Target Non-Traditional Students

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Today's student is not unlike an online shopper. With an array of higher education choices available — two-year or four-year institution, profit or nonprofit, Ivy League or state — students eagerly comparison shop and welcome personalized “recommendations” based on previous visits and interactions.

And in online education, especially when it comes to non-traditional students, creating a personal experience takes on a whole new meaning. These students aren't sitting in the dining hall on campus; they may be juggling a full-time job, family and schoolwork — somewhere on the other side of the country. Personalization can help non-traditional students feel like a part of the campus community.

Non-traditional students use various forms of online communication to stay connected with their respected institutions. While some like to text, while others like to tweet and still others prefer good ol' e-mail. At [The University of Southern Mississippi](#), we tailor our outreach to give each student a personalized interaction with our brand. The following four tips are the secret to our success.

1) Empower users to set their own preferences.

Via [Hobsons Connect](#), our constituent relationship management system, users can manage their communications preferences. With a range of options (Facebook, Twitter, text message, e-mail, LinkedIn and more), we put the power in our users' hands. This gives our prospective students two-way communication channels that are accessible 24/7.

2) Personalize with video.

To provide as much “face” time as possible with current students, faculty and alumni, we produced recruitment videos for our programs and then embedded them into communications campaigns and social media. Our prospects now have the opportunity to dive into information from faculty and students who are actually completing their degree in a field they are interested in pursuing themselves.

3) Shine in social media.

Social media plays a huge role in today's personalization process. Yet, with all the possible channels, how do you navigate the noise to create engaging, meaningful experiences? With a social engagement landscape crowded with Facebook pages and Pinterest boards, how can you stand out from the clutter?

Explore launching a social media contest.

These have been around for a while, because they work. But like all tools, they must be done right. Before launching a contest, ask yourself:

- Does this contest make sense for my school?
- Is it aligned with our social media strategy and communications/marketing goals?
- How will it relate to my students?
- Does it offer value to them? How about the institution?
- Is it more than just about winning a free iPad or gift card?

A great example for higher ed is a “Tweet us a picture” contest. For instance, ask prospects and current students to tweet a photo of their favorite learning space or even a candid of their reaction when they first made it on the dean’s list. This example not only allows you to engage with students based on their interests, but also delivers data on how your online students learn best.

Here are a few examples of successful social media contests from the corporate world:

- [5 Social Media Marketing Contests That Boosted Consumer Brands](#)
- [8 Real-Life Examples of Engaging Pinterest Contests](#)
- [6 Stellar Social Media Contests](#)

4) Provide the right info.

Personalized communication plans allow you to provide non-traditional students with information that is pertinent to their specific program of interest and learning styles, and initiates discussions about campus services most relevant to them. This can include: program-specific scholarship information, financial aid, transcript reviews, degree and technology requirements, class schedules, campus resource lists and a warm and fuzzy personal message from program faculty. We at [USM’s Eagle Learning Online](#) like to think our tagline says it best when providing a personalized experience for non-traditional students: “Your Life, Plus College.”