

Guidelines for Cultivating Key Influencer Relationships

Finding passive shoppers—those prospects who won't come to you, perhaps because they do not even know they are interested in continuing education—requires you to go to them. The search for your passive prospect means developing strategic connections with the influential and authentic voices to which this type of prospect turns for advice and information. Tool #8, Methodology for Identifying Key Influencers, outlined strategies for identifying these sources for any given program or industry space. The next step is cultivating relationships with those individuals, requiring an understanding of the value proposition you offer them and pitfalls to avoid.

This tool will walk through the process of developing productive relationships with four types of key influencer: bloggers, social media groups, discussion groups, and professional organizations.



Use Boilerplate “About Program” Language

Save time by using boilerplate language at the bottom of any posts you or your faculty contribute, ensuring the basic information about your brand or program is consistently communicated.

Bloggers

Bloggers are high-value key influencers to prospects (and therefore you) because they speak with authority, can be quite prolific, and are likely more accessible and approachable than other sources of industry insight.

Understand Blogger Motivations

Bloggers are interested in partnering with universities because the brand name offers prestige and a trustworthy liaison offers access to authoritative contributors. Consider the following “selling points,” which you should emphasize, and “sensitive subjects,” which you should avoid, when approaching a blogger:

- Selling points**
- Reputation-boosting content related to the industry—new partnerships, hot topics, projected growth areas etc.
 - Access to experts and/or employer contacts (though be protective of these relationships)
 - Authority-enhancing access to breaking news

Sensitive Subjects

Avoid anything that might comprise their integrity or honest-broker status. For this reason, don't try to get them to make a hard push for your institution. Try instead to paint your institution as a resource for blog readers: see suggestions below.

Suggested Contributions



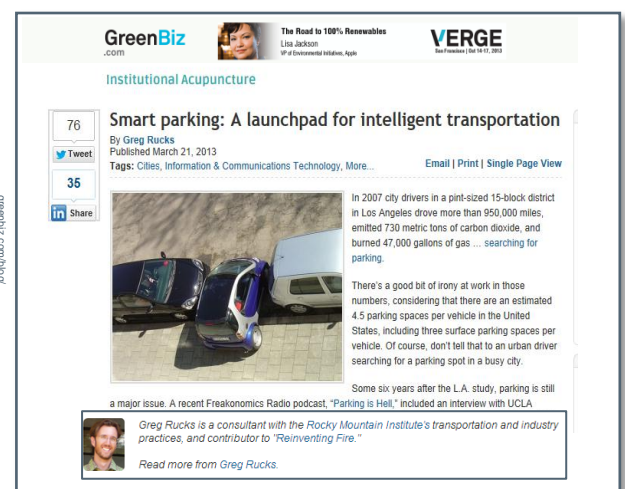
Sponsored Story

Commonly found on blogs, sponsored stories allow you be open about your marketing agenda. As long as you (or a contributing faculty member) contribute your authentic voice and knowledge about an industry or occupation (i.e., what the blogger wants), you don't hide that you have a marketing interest.



Industry-Insight Article

As a marketing team, with or without instructor support, you can provided trends in industry employment based on your own market research



The Rocky Mountain Institute promotes its initiative, Reinventing Fire, through a guest post on GreenBiz.com. The contributor's photo and a link to his research appears at the end of the post.

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Industry Associations and Groups

Get to know the industry and occupation associations that are related to your programs and forge a connection with a content developer at the association. Most associations dedicate a portion of their website to “resources” or “education and training”; you want your program listed here! After you have built relationships with the obvious associations, seek out niche associations and ask if there is an overlap between a general program (e.g., a management certificate or a social media certificate) and the niche industry. Anne Arundel Community College did just when they partnered with Bowling Proprietors’ Association of America. Eventually, the partnership turned into a co-branded, bowling alley management certificate delivered online.

Understand Users’ Motivation

- Free resources: your website (its blogs and free webinars) and information about programs are resources to the association’s members
- Short cuts for members working toward an organization-sponsored certification: offer applicable information about approved courses, which are provided by your unit and can lower the amount of time employees need to spend working in the field before becoming “certified” by the professional organization
- Access to new members: if you are willing to list the association on your website, you increase the association’s name recognition among prospect members and/or members’ employers
- Access to industry professionals and subject matter experts (SMEs). You can help by contributing articles (provided by your SMEs) to any periodicals they produce

Selling points

- Immediate co-branding before the organization gets to know you
- Exclusive access to organization members
- Hard-sell language or aggressive calls to action (think: “apply here”)

Sensitive Subjects

Suggested Contributions

✓ Program Information and Contact Details for Associations’ Education/Resources Pages

Ask that your best-fit program be featured on the organization’s “resources” or education page. Also provide a contact name, phone number, and email address should an incredibly eager prospect stumble upon the website.

✓ Links to Free Webinars, MOOCs, or Blogs

Suggest that the association link to any free, industry-focused resources you offer prospects.

✓ Host Association Information on “About the Industry” or “Career” Section of Program Website

Professional organizations like to toot their horns and reach as wide an audience as possible; offer to list their website as a resource for prospective students considering a career in relevant industry. Point out that employers may also spot them in this context.

✓ Subject-Matter-Expert Perspective

Suggest that an instructor write an article as a guest contributor, offering an authentic voice and knowledge about the association’s focus industry or occupation .



Education & Training

The “Education and Training” link on the Bowling Proprietors’ Association of America directs visitors to an online module offered through Anne Arundel Community College.

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Social Media Groups

Find additional pockets of passive prospects on social media groups associated with their professions or industries. However, be sure to conserve recruiter time for only the highest-yield online communities—there are a myriad of groups with duplicative purposes. Follow the example of the University of Wisconsin-Platteville and first analyze the user demographics of professional social media sites. Based on LinkedIn demographics, UWP first identified three degree programs for which the highest number of prospective students were likely to be congregating on LinkedIn. Next, UWP staff monitored group discussion and chimed in when a member asked about credentialing or education. The illustration below explains.


Understand Users' Motivation


- Selling points**
- Authority and expertise around the educational/credentialing landscape
 - Free resources (e.g., instructor-presented webinars and articles that you provide links for)
- Sensitive Subjects** Hard-sell language or aggressive calls to action (think: “apply here”)


Suggested Contributions

✓ Understand Platform Dynamics

Who Uses LinkedIn?

 **Gender**
60% male

 **Education Level**
Majority BA holders

 **Industry**
Engineering, IT, Finance




✓ Identify Best-Fit Degrees

- Criminal Justice
- Business Administration
- Engineering
- Adult Education
- Organizational Change
- Project Management

✓ Select Groups for Monitoring



Criteria for Selecting Group

-  **Right Job Titles**
Align with student profile
-  **Consistent Activity**
Regular postings
-  **Avoid Job Seeker Groups**
Less interested in degree

✓ Offer Credentialing Advice



- 8 recruiters; responsible for 20-25 groups each
- ~20 postings per month; 2,000 per year
- Only 3 hours per month

LinkedIn Project Management in Wisconsin



Joe Group
Member

“I’d like to get PMP certification...can anyone recommend a good program?”



Jane
Recruiter

“There are a lot of different ways to get certification, such as _____. We also have a program at UWP.... <http://www.link-here.edu>



Jane
Recruiter

“Check our free webinar on six sigma standards, presented by one of the PMP certification instructors. You and other members might be interested: <http://webinar.example.edu>

Automated Response Tools

Daily Digest Emails
Automatic notifications to new group discussion postings

Templatized Responses
Contain useful information beyond “sell”; ~12 FAQs applicable across disciplines

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Discussion Boards

Posting on a discussion board requires careful calibration: you will want to respond to a question or theme of questions in order to be authentically part of the discussion (and authenticity is key for attracting the passive prospect). For example, identify questions related to credentialing, and offer your expertise—with a soft sell at the end.

Understand Users' Motivation

Selling points

- Authority and expertise around the educational/credentialing landscape. You can help by commenting when you see questions about such topics.
- Troubleshooting when visitors are looking for a resource: if instructors have the expertise to answer a question posted on a forum, link to their research or approach them about commenting on the discussion board.

Sensitive Subjects

- Posting information about your program out of the blue (i.e., not in response to a previously posted question)
- Hard-sell language or aggressive calls to action (think: “apply here”)

Suggested Contributions

Information on Credentials Post

Discussion board users are not shy about asking for recommendations, and, occasionally, they ask for recommendations on courses, certificates, and degrees. Respond with information about the credentialing landscape on the whole (e.g., distinction between a certificate and a degree and general content focus) and then provide a link to your best-fit program.

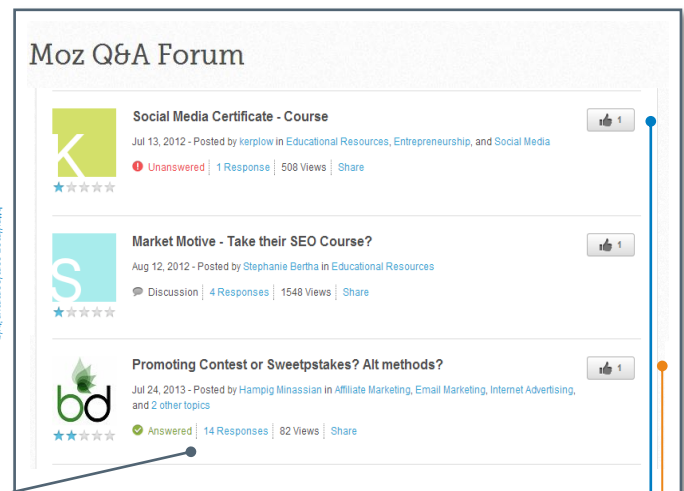
Your Question-Answered (by an Authority!) Post

When you stumble across a question that 1) appears to require a complex response, and therefore the expertise of an instructor, and 2) receives a lot of “thumbs up” or “stars” from other users asking themselves the same question, ask an instructor if he or she could write up a response or send you a link to an article to post on his or her behalf.

Activity Metrics Help Determine Whether to Post

The number of views, number of responses, and quality of responses can help your team decide whether or not to formulate a post:

- More than 100 views indicates a post is a good candidate for a response
- Fewer than 5 quality responses indicates that there is room for another expert to weigh in (cue: instructors!)
- By “quality,” we mean any information that answers the original question; often, response include additional questions or echo a previous question
- Some discussion boards post a symbol (e.g., red exclamation mark) to indicate unanswered questions—you can be the first to respond and, in some formats, at the top of the page



Moz, a software firm, hosts a discussion board related to SEO and digital marketing. The discussion board features both types of posts that merit a response from a university staff member or instructor:

- A question about who offers social media certificates
- A rather open-ended, complicated question about promoting a sweepstakes