

The Power of the Old Media

How one institution's good news spiked interest in the school

By Dick Jones

ANY COLLEGE OR UNIVERSITY that isn't using Web 2.0 to its fullest is falling behind. We all know that. Colleges need to be RSSing, Digging, tweeting, blogging, social networking, virtual worlding, podcasting, Flickr-ing, YouTube-ing, and wiki-ing. (My apologies for creating new and possibly horrific verbs.)

But they also need to continue paying attention to the stodgy old traditional news media. There follows a tale.

This fall Mansfield University (Pa.), a public institution of 3,400 students, became the first school in the nation to have sprint football—where players cannot weigh more than 172 pounds—as its *only* football program. The others playing the sport—Cornell, Princeton, Penn, Army, and Navy—also field heavyweight teams.

The sport, which at MU has one full-time employee (the head coach), no scholarships, little recruiting budget, and no “extras” such as spring and preseason practice, is much cheaper to run than regular football. MU was paying \$474,000 annually for the privilege of being a gridiron doormat in the NCAA Division II Pennsylvania State Athletic Conference. Sprint football, by contrast, cost about \$125,000 this past season. Football is important at Mansfield, which hosted the first-ever night football game in 1892 and commemorates that event with a week-end festival each fall. Officials had to find a way to have football and save money too.

Make no mistake, sprint is real football. Pads, helmets, contusions, the whole hundred yards. It is identical to the regular game except the players are smaller. So when Mansfield announced in October 2007 that it would field a sprint team in 2008, the university suddenly found itself in need of a large number of small football players.

An online information request form was



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created for high schoolers (www.gomounties.com/Sprint_Football/questionnaire.html), and marketing efforts included local, regional, and statewide media relations; e-mails to high school coaches; regional television, radio, and print ads; rental of a billboard along the Pennsylvania Turnpike; university podcasts; and speeches by MU Director of Athletic Operations Steve McCloskey at coaches conventions (where he handed out footballs imprinted with “Mansfield University Sprint Football: Make History; visit GoMounties.com”).

Over the winter, spring, and summer this effort yielded 175 electronically submitted inquiries, according to McCloskey. Enough of them became admitted students to produce a squad of 51, most of them freshmen. They came from nine states, including Alaska, Texas, Nevada, Michigan, and Maine.

Here's where it gets interesting, at least for me. When Mansfield's sprint football team first took the field in September 2008, it was the subject of news stories on the Associated Press wire and on the front page of *The Wall Street Journal*. And in the month after the publicity, an additional 150 information

forms were submitted electronically.

The bottom line is that following the national news media attention, nearly as many inquiries were generated in a single month as had been produced in the many previous months in which the site was active.

BEHIND THE SCENES

What happened here? We all know that most kids are not reading *The Wall Street Journal*. Nor are they paying attention to many of the outlets where the AP stories ran. Conventional wisdom is that young males are not news consumers. Yet there was a clear spike in interest after the news stories appeared.

My hypothesis: Parents and grandparents saw the stories. Uncles and aunts saw the stories. Neighbors saw them. And they showed the stories to the kids. Others, McCloskey reports, alerted high school coaches who told their squads about this opportunity. And the kids did what kids do—they went to the web to check it out.

The news media still have a lot of clout. They provide an approval that's important in an era awash with information sources. Young people may not pay day-to-day attention to the news, but they do value the third-party endorsement of a positive news story when it is called to their attention. It is not perceived as the institution saying good things about itself. Thus it has far more credibility.

The morals of the story: Tweet while you toil. Wiki while you work. Have a nice first life while you're in Second Life. But remember the power of the traditional media and a good news story. Do that and you'll be as snug as a pea in a podcast. **U**

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