

Virtual campus tours give students an insider's view

September 2 2011, By Bridget Carey

When college students begin classes this month, some arrive after getting their acceptance notices on Facebook. Others are using smartphone applications to find out which parking spots are available. And others show up after taking walking tours through their campuses - without ever leaving their homes.

Universities are turning to new media, like interactive videos and smartphone apps, to keep competitive and attract future students. For example, take Barry University in Miami Shores, Fla., where students use a Facebook app to browse available housing, pay room deposits and register for orientation. They'll even be notified on Facebook when they are accepted into the school before formal letters can make it through the mail. With one click, students can instantly share the big news to their network of friends.

"We want to take our system to where they are," said Michel Sily, assistant vice president for enrollment marketing and Internet strategies at Barry University.

That's the new mantra fueling the growth of YourCampus360, a startup that creates virtual, interactive tours for colleges for the university website, [mobile apps](#) and Facebook pages. Its founders are based in Aventura, Fla., and New York, and after going live last year, the tours are available on 67 school campuses in the U.S. (40 of which signed up this year), which include Stony Brook University, Syracuse University, Brandeis University and Ohio University.

An animated guide narrates with information about the campus and student life as users click to "walk" through campus. Similar to how [Google Street View](#) works, users click their way to move their through a series of progressive 360-degree images from various points in the walking path, with audio facts playing throughout notable landmarks.

Abi Mandelbaum, [chief executive officer](#), said so far more than 1 million users have taken a virtual campus tour, and some clients are reporting an increase in physical campus visits since implementing the tour, as much as 30 percent for some schools, he said.

The tours can be offered in multiple languages and cost between \$5,000 and \$15,000 a year to create, maintain and keep updated, depending on the package a school chooses and if it will include an app or Facebook page.

"The grand majority of schools that sign up with us, they sign up with all the platforms. They recognize that they need to be out there," Mandelbaum said.

YourCampus360 is working with one Florida school for the time being: Ave Maria University near Naples. Some South Florida campuses already have their own flavors of virtual tours and apps. At Florida Atlantic University, prospective students can send in an application from its Apple device app. FAU partnered with Blackboard Mobile, the same vendor behind apps for the University of Miami and Florida International University, which launched its app in August.

Every school is on networks like Twitter, Foursquare, YouTube and Facebook - but at UM, each graduating class has its own Facebook page. The Class of 2015 [Facebook](#) page used to be managed by the Admissions Department, but now is overseen by Student Affairs and will be taken over by the alumni group when the time comes.

"It's more about being reactive to what students want," said Edward Gillis, assistant vice president for enrollment management and executive director of admissions. "I've been doing this for 40 years, and before you sent out a brochure and sent out an application, and some applied and some didn't. Nowadays it's totally different."

FIU just began working with a higher education marketing firm, Stamats Communications, out of Iowa, on a virtual tour for its website.

"The hope is to make it dynamic, to do something more and branch off of what would be a standard virtual tour," said Barry Taylor, FIU's director of undergraduate admissions.

Social media this year has taken a more important role at FIU this year, according to Matt Herzberger, director of Web communications.

"I think now we're really getting it to be something we spend a lot of time on, a real platform to connect on."

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