A More Perfect UNIO

By JOHN FRITZ

In fall 2002, the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, joined the list of education institutions making headlines for unknowingly releasing to the public private information about students, faculty, or staff. We discovered that Google, a public Internet search tool, had indexed the Web archive of a private e-mail discussion list our system administrators used to routinely synchronize databases of users' unique identifying information—in this case their Social Security numbers—before we set up an automated system in 2000. While we were making some changes in spring 2002 to delete the mailing list from general daily use, a software bug made the Web archive publicly accessible. At some point Google indexed this file, and we became aware of it in late October 2002, when a student contacted us after finding a UMBC Web page when he Googled his SSN.

We took immediate action to remove the pages, but we had to work with Google to get them to delete their cached archive, all of which took about a week. Even though the release of data was inadvertent, and we had no evidence others had accessed the page, we sent an e-mail to every single user whose name appeared on the list—9,300 in all—to let them know what had happened.

The matter might have ended with our internal response to ensure the problem did not recur, but Jack Suess, chief information officer and head of the Office of Information Technology, recognized that we owed our constituents a full explanation. "Since this affected UMBC's reputation, I knew it was no longer an internal OIT issue," Suess says. "We needed to take the lead on explaining what happened technically, but we needed help from the advancement office to get that message across as clearly and completely as possible."

Suess drafted the letter with the help of Mike Carlin, OIT's director of infrastructure and client services, then consulted Lisa Akchin, UMBC's associate vice president for marketing and public relations, and Charlie Melichar, former director of news and information, who edited it and coordinated the mild media frenzy that followed when the student newspaper and the Baltimore *Sun* covered the story.

Although we were blindsided by this incident, and campus constituents used it to question our ability to safeguard their private information, we used it as an opportunity to refocus our efforts to better protect confidential information. Compared with other campuses that faced similar situations, I think we minimized the damage to UMBC's reputation—and maybe even enhanced our standing—because we came clean quickly and delivered our message directly

A look at one successful partnership between IT and PR departments
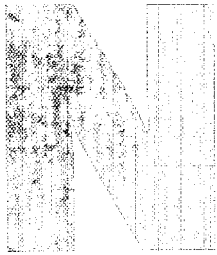
to the affected users. The media reported these remedies (as well as our sins), and I think it was evident we did the right thing. Ultimately, classic crisis management—tell the truth, don't cover up—helped preserve UMBC's reputation.

BUILDING TRUST BEFORE A CRISIS HITS

The successful handling of this crisis didn't happen automatically. It drew on a long working relationship between the advancement and information technology office staffs that "respects each unit's talents and strengths," Akchin says.

To some extent, I suppose I embody the close relationship between departments. In the five years I've worked for UMBC's information technology office, I've found that my job involves many of the skills I used in my previous position as media relations director in the public relations office. IT staff members might not be chasing the *New York Times* or cultivating prospective donors as we explain technical issues and policies, but we're still trying to change people's attitudes and behaviors, which requires strategic thinking about message design, delivery, and follow-up.

The collaboration between the PR and IT offices at UMBC extends to the development of the institution Web site, often a sore subject on many campuses.
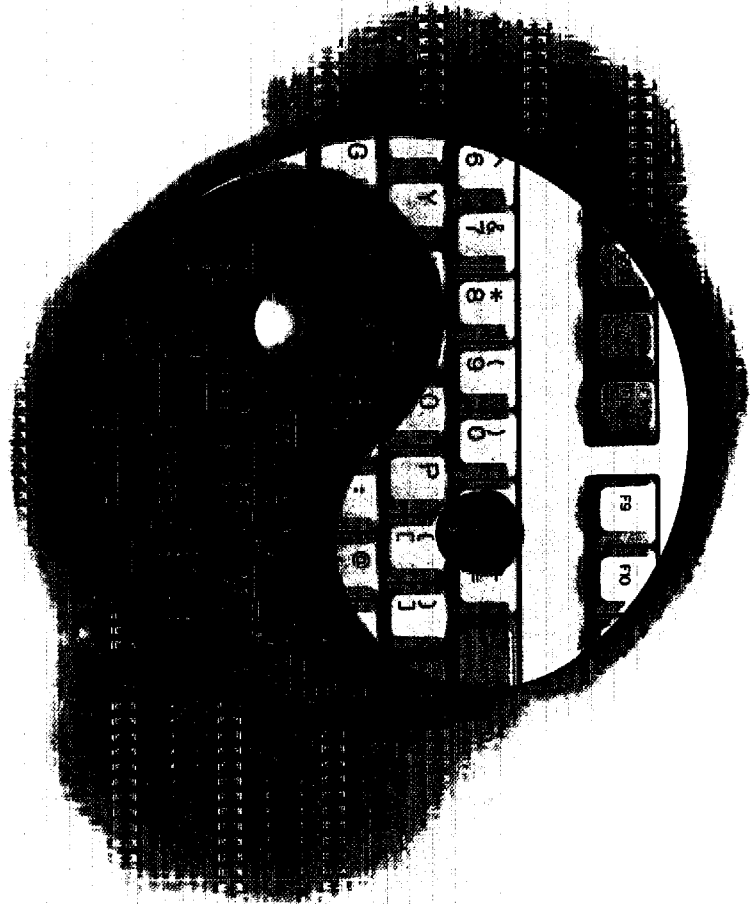
When Suess created UMBC's first home page in 1994, he realized the Web was more than just a new technology and that he'd need help.

"It was clear the Web was going to become the dominant marketing channel," Suess says. "Luckily, the advancement office saw the benefits of taking this on." Suess arranged for OIT to cover the costs of two Web designers for the advancement office as well as many part-time student programmers. But beyond providing technical and financial support, Suess realized that his office was not well-suited to the marketing task implicit in developing the Web site. For one thing, he says, the computing office was not "positioned high enough in the organization to be the arbiter of the home page." In addition, he says, he knew the strengths and weaknesses of his staff.

"Most technologists do a poor job designing applications because they simply don't understand how [people] use or learn technology. As a result, we tend to build designs that are too complex, and worse, we use language that is too technical to explain how the application works. Where writers and communications professionals can help is by bringing an eye that is more akin to the user's, asking questions, and putting technology into the context of the business process."

Thus began a long working relationship among Suess, Akchin, me, and many others in advancement and IT as we began to refine UMBC's Web site. It

was hard work; we had to carve out time from existing duties, and we sometimes met resistance from other departments wanting to define UMBC's online presence. But working through a campuswide Web advisory committee, we gradually gained campus trust and developed a site to represent the entire university. In the process, we won two 1999 CASE District II Circle of Excellence Gold medals for our main site and our portal, myUMBC. Today, the site gets more than 350,000 page views and a thousand admissions e-mail inquiries a month.

Suess has sought assistance from the communications staff on other issues, too. He once managed UMBC's weekly campus e-mail digest of announcements and updates for faculty and staff. It became a time-consuming obligation, however, so ultimately he turned it over to the internal communications staff in the advancement office.

Also, UMBC is implementing new online integrated human resources and finance systems as part of a migration of all campus systems to PeopleSoft. Such major changes to daily business systems can be extremely stressful. As leader of the project, Suess regularly consults with Akchin, who is chair of the PeopleSoft Change Management Committee. Together they work to advise the finance and human resources offices about the importance of communications, especially when it involves technical information, with people who will use the new systems.

in short

MODEL BEHAVIOR. A little effort and awareness is all it takes to help campus communications and technology colleagues work together to benefit their institutions, says John Fritz in his above article. One good example of a communications-savvy IT effort is the University of Maryland, Baltimore County's Office of Information Technology Web site. The site, www.umbc.edu/oit, is a storehouse of important information for students, staff, and faculty, grouped in user-friendly sections including accounts, e-mail, hardware and software, security, and Internet, Web, and networks. The site also prominently features an OIT news section, a frequently asked questions section, and help desk contact information.

HACK ATTACK. It's not a symptom of the latest flu virus, but one of the many ills that's been hitting campus computer networks. Communicating technology policy is increasingly important. Everyone on campus needs to understand the threats that exist say Shirley Payne in an EDUCAUSE Quarterly article. In "Developing Security Education and Awareness Programs," Payne makes the case for creating awareness programs and outlines institution experiences, effective delivery methods, communication tips, and ideas about keeping such education programs current. To read the article, go to www.educause.edu/pub/eq, click on "Issue Archives" and then on Volume 26 (2003), Number 4.

Creating a security and awareness marketing campaign
is one area where IT and PR should collaborate.
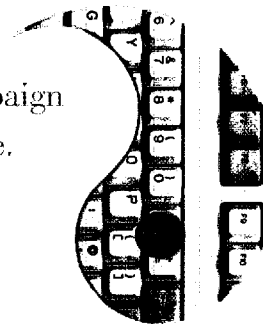
RAISING IT AWARENESS

UMBC's unintentional release of Social Security numbers was more than just an IT problem. In terms of external relations, it underscored a larger concern about higher education's perceived role as the weak link in the national online infrastructure.

"Security awareness is always one of the top challenges of any security program," says Suess, who is co-chair of the EDUCAUSE/Internet2 Computer and Network Security Task Force. Yet, he adds, a recent EDUCAUSE Center on Applied Research study showed that less than 40 percent of education institutions surveyed had begun a security and awareness marketing campaign. "This is one area where it is clear that IT and PR should collaborate," Seuss says.

Other issues pose communications challenges for the IT office. IT officials are responsible for making campus users aware of Web site content policies, responsible Internet and e-mail use, and avoidance of viruses, just to name a few. These messages can be difficult to convey, especially on a campus. How can campus leaders effectively communicate to thousands of students getting ready to arrive on campus how they should make their computers safe? Many campuses, including UMBC, were hit hard by the Blaster worm in 2003 precisely because it arrived in mid-August, when it was difficult to get the word out.

At UMBC, we've tried a variety of traditional communications strategies to improve users' IT awareness:

Campus media. For two years I wrote a monthly "Tech Watch" column in our faculty/staff newspaper, *Insights Online*, that focused on practical tips for users, including how to set up virus protection, an e-mail vacation message, or a spam filter. I've also tried to be *Insights Online*'s technical stringer, writing stories on our PeopleSoft systems implementation. Mike Carlin has worked closely with the *Retriever Weekly* student newspaper—an even bigger challenge when you combine the complexity of reporting on technical topics with a young editorial staff and weekly deadlines.

Online newsletters. Two years ago, OIT started a quarterly online newsletter of tips, articles, and features with related links for more information (*www.umbc.edu/oit/newsletter*). I e-mail just the headlines—with a link to the full Web version—to an opt-in e-mail list of approximately 2,000 students, faculty, and staff. The newsletter has helped keep key messages in front of users who often are hard to reach. I do a similar e-mail newsletter for the nearly 10,000 students, faculty, and staff members who use our Blackboard course management system.

Workshops. In addition to Blackboard workshops, we've co-sponsored a "Teaching, Learning, and Technology" brown-bag workshop series for informal presentations on Web development, teaching and

PLUCKY PSAs. To create awareness about network security issues and promote responsible computing, some campuses have created short videos. The University of Virginia created "When I Go to U.Va.," a parody of the popular "When I Grow Up" Monster.com commercial (www.itc.virginia.edu/pubs/docs/RespComp/videos/home.html). The University of Buffalo's "Caught in the Act" encourages viewers to consider the trouble they can get into by just fooling around (www.cit.buffalo.edu/security/caught.html). "Blond, Jane Blond" is the star of Princeton University's "Spam Another Day" video, which helps viewers manage spam on their campus accounts (webmedia.princeton.edu/video/005-Spam.htm).

GOT ISSUES? Don't we all? But to collaborate with IT departments, campus communicators need to understand the specific issues their IT counterparts face. For an orientation of sorts, PR pros should check out the Campus Computing Project's Annual Survey of IT issues, available at www.campuscomputing.net. More than 600 two- and four-year public and private colleges and universities participate in the survey, which focuses on campus planning and policy issues. Also worth a look is the EDUCAUSE/Internet2 Computer and Network Security Task Force's site, www.educause.edu/security, and EDUCAUSE's "Consumer Guide to Evaluating Information Technology on Campus" (www.educause.edu/consumerguide).

learning, and occasional product demonstrations
(*www.umbc.edu/brownbag*).

Compact discs. Each year, OIT produces a
CD-ROM to automatically configure a user's computer for the free Internet dial-up connection to the
UMBC network, which is an Internet service
provider for many campus users. The CD also contains customized versions of Internet Explorer or
Netscape, utilities, and a video showing resident students how to connect their computers to the resident
student network (*www.umbc.edu/oit/cd*). The video
also was shown on the campus cable system.

On-site help. During the first week of each
semester, OIT staff members head to the residence
halls one evening to help students troubleshoot
networking and setup problems. Working with
residence life staff, we post flyers announcing the
"network blitz," and we also work with the Resident
Student Association to help get the word out.

Firewall. In fall 2003, OIT implemented a firewall
on the resident network. Because student computers
often are the least secure, this has helped reduce the
impact of Internet worm attacks that propagate by
e-mail to all campus users. An outbound bandwidth
restriction also has helped limit the number of students
tempted to serve as an MP3 or DVD download hub
for non-UMBC users.

Student, faculty, and staff orientations. At least
one OIT director tries to attend each of these campuswide events, armed with our help desk brochures
and sometimes a wireless laptop to quickly troubleshoot account problems.

UNDERSTANDING USERS

By understanding how non-IT people use technology,
the information technology office has been able to
keep the institution's best interests in mind, even if
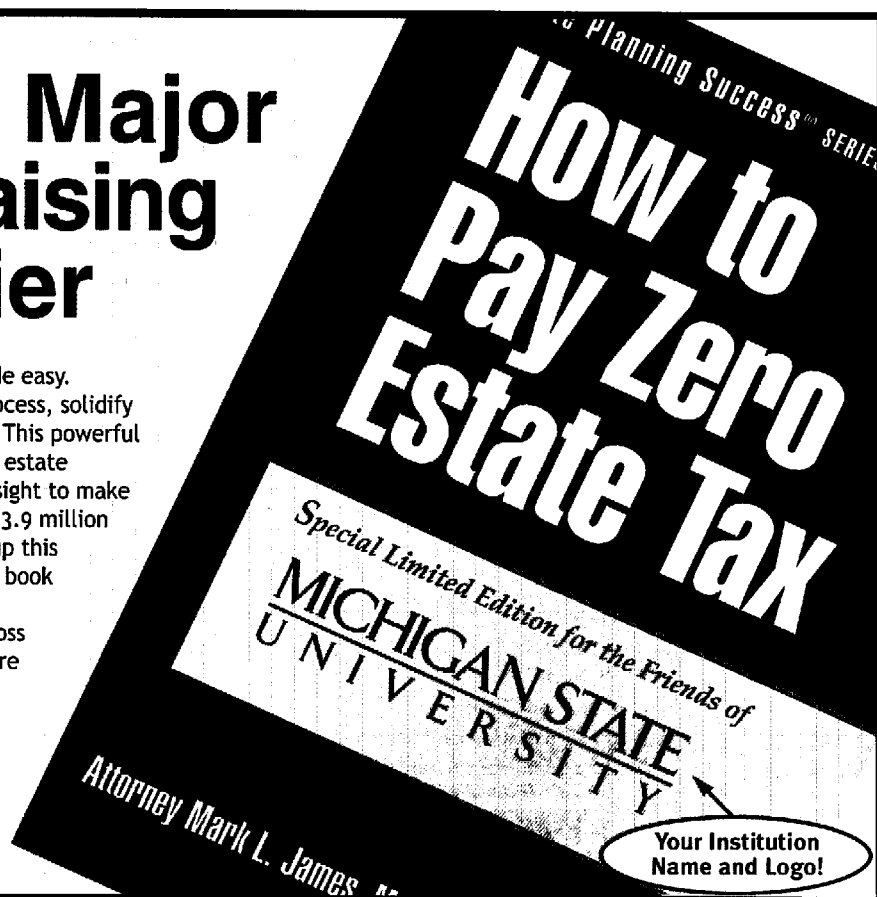that doesn't always lead to the easiest IT solutions.

An example is our decision to integrate virus
protection into the e-mail servers. "When we had

virus protection available to all desktops, many IT staff [members] said we should just mandate that every person use the antivirus software through our Novell network," Suess says. "I felt that solution didn't fit with our culture because a large number of faculty didn't use Novell. To mandate something I couldn't enforce wasn't a solution, so we developed a way to handle this on the mail server and provide some added protection to the campus."

Often, though, a solution requires teaching users to do things differently—something to which they might not be receptive if the instructions come from IT. It's times like these when having a partner in the communications office is crucial. "When you have to do things that require the users to change their behavior, you need to think about marketing," Suess says. "Universities have so many sub-constituencies that if you don't reach out to the PR group for help, you will never reach everyone."

Although some IT offices are no doubt up to the communications challenges, it's probably more effective for most of them to collaborate with the communications office. Such partnerships establish a solid relationship for future initiatives. Relations between PR and IT have changed a bit here at UMBC when I moved to the "dark side," but communications pros don't need to switch offices to cultivate closer ties. With a little effort and awareness, communications and technology colleagues can work together to better manage the PR-IT relationship in ways that benefit the campus as a whole. ▣

John Fritz is director of new media learning and development in the Office of Information Technology at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. He was previously UMBC's director of news and online information, but he left PR for IT to help faculty incorporate teaching, learning, and technology.