A Student's PR Guide to the Imagine Cup

Using the Social Media and the Microsoft Imagine Cup Experience to Accelerate your Career

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Overview

From start to finish, participating in Microsoft's Imagine Cup takes a lot of effort and you should be rewarded for all your work! Creating and building your Imagine Cup project is the hardest part, but to really get the most out of your efforts you need to do a little self-marketing. This guide will show you how a lot of little efforts on your part can yield big dividends when it comes to using your Imagine Cup experiences to help you get a great job or other recognition.

What is Self-Marketing?

First off, don't be afraid of the term "marketing". Throughout your life you will be trying to convince people of the value of your ideas. That is marketing". The goal of self-marketing is to create an "audience" of friends, colleagues, faculty, mentors, and others who learn about your project and who become increasingly interested in what you are doing. Some will provide real support for your project. Others you will impress and inspire. All will lend you spiritual and moral support. The more people who learn about your project, the "cooler" it will become and at some point you'll develop a real following. You can then use this public interest to raise your stature with recruiters and other looking to offer recognition. It sounds a little selfish at first glance, but you really are helping to build the technology ecosystem by connecting with others. Nothing tells a recruiter or hiring manager that you know your stuff than having hundreds or thousands of "followers" behind you. The opportunity for you is:

- Maximize the return on your investment of time/energy/creative effort
- Differentiate you from your competitors for jobs
- Create the biggest impression of the importance of your innovation/contribution
- Build the reputation of your school (and your degree)
- Obtain 3rd party evidence/validation of your skills
- Add high value "wow" factor to your resume

Key Messages that Drive Interest

The core of your self-marketing effort is the communication of things that are of great interest to your target audience (mostly your peers). Some of the elements of your out-of-class project experience that makes it interesting are:

- The problem you are trying to solve
- Real world experience vs. class assignment
- Use of cutting-edge tools and technologies
- Challenges and how you overcome them
- Interesting experiences you have "along the way"

Team Fortran and C have a "wow" moment with "Avatar" director James Cameron at the US Imagine Cup Finals

Methods & Media

Throughout the life of your project, you are going to have lots of interesting things to share; you just need to know what, when and where to say it. Your primary outlets should include:

- Blogging
- Twitter
- Facebook
- Campus newspapers & newsletters
- Online student forums
- Other social media
- Your resume

Don't limit yourself to these outlets, but I mention these because some of them work together and a post on one can replicate to the others with little or no effort. How do you make this happen? That's what the rest of this post is about!

Twitter

Twitter is less about keeping connected with your friends and more about keeping connected with your community and audience. Tweet early and often as you start on your Imagine Cup adventure. Some of the key things to Twitter about include:

- Forming a team
- Looking for a project
- Choosing a technology
- Finding a mentor
- Frustrations and challenges you face
- Thrill of solving problems
- Anxiety of approaching deadlines
- Gratitude for people who are helping you
- Competition wins & losses

- Advancing to the next round of the competition
- Celebrating wins
- Plans for next round, next competition
- Lessons learned
- Cool people you meet
- Key learning

A best practice is to install the "Tiny Twitter" application on your mobile phone. The application lets you "tweet" anywhere, plus you can easily upload a photo from your phone and add a link to your tweet to enhance interest.

It only takes a second to "tweet" if you have TinyTwitter on your mobile phone

Some sample "tweets" would be:

- "Installing the Windows Phone 7 SDK; so far so good #fb"
- "Tweaking our medical diagnostic program; leaving tomorrow for Imagine Cup finals in Poland #ImagineCup #fb"
- "Just landed in Poland for Imagine Cup World Finals: 14 hours is a long flight #ImagineCup #fb"
- "Just talked with James Cameron at the US Imagine Cup Finals!!!!! #fb #ImagineCup"

Use the #ImagineCup hash tag at the end of your post and your tweets will get viewed and possibly retweeted by people who are interested in the Imagine Cup. Retweet other Imagine Cup tweets from your team members or even other teams. Use the Facebook "Selective Tweets" application and when you use the #fb hash tag it automatically posts your "tweet" to your Facebook Wall. That way you reach both your Twitter audience and your facebook friends at the same time. Create your own team hash tag so you can keep track of who is retweeting your posts. So how does this help your career? In your resume you can mention that your project was viewed by x number of people on Facebook and Twitter to show how interested other people are in your project, plus several competition categories have "People's Choice" awards that depend on your ability to get as many people as possible voting for *your*

project. So building an audience can be a huge competitive factor in those types of awards. More about this in the resume section.

Facebook [and other social networking sites]

Facebook is another "audience" for you to talk about your Imagine Cup experiences. If you install the "Selective Tweets" application, your Twitter "tweets" can show up automatically on your Facebook wall saving you time and multiplying your reach. In addition to your own Imagine Cup-related posts, you can also "like" or "friend" Microsoft and get additional Imagine Cup coverage on your Facebook wall. Getting people in tune with your Imagine Cup activities is really helpful on Facebook because of the "People's Choice" awards. If you start early, your friends will be up to speed when it time for them to vote for you.

Linkedin is another social media site for you to consider. As you meet and build relationships with mentors, industry professionals, Microsoft people and media contacts during the Imagine Cup competition, build your "professional" network on LinkedIn. Don't update your status on LinkedIn as frequently as on Facebook, but some appropriate key milestones might be:

- Registering for Imagine Cup Competition
- Submitting your Round Two Project
- Being selected as a Finalist
- Winning or Placing in the Imagine Cup

Blogging

Blogging is a lot of work. If you don't already have a blog, think twice about starting and maintaining one in addition to all you are doing to compete. If, on the other hand, one of the members of your Imagine Cup team is your media guru (the person making the video and slide show), then the Imagine Cup is a great place to build a diary of all your background work and accomplishments. Plus, it is really easy to put a link to your blog on your resume so recruiters and hiring managers can see all those pictures that say a thousand words about your great creativity and skills. Whatever blogging hoster you use, try using [Windows Live Writer](#) as your editor. You can set Writer up so it automatically uploads to your blog. Install the Digg and Twitter Notify add-ins and whenever you blog, it will send a tweet with a URL to your post. Add that #fb hash tag to the Twitter Notifier and you have the digital media trifecta in one post. During Round One, once a week is plenty. In Round Two, maybe every other day during that last week. And during the US Finals and World Wide Finals, every day or even twice a day if your team is red hot. Get invited to the US or World Finals, then en route, hotel room and other "backstage" moments can add great human interest perspectives to your experience. Share them!

University, College & Department Marketing

Universities love it when their students get recognized for outstanding work, particularly when they (the students) do well in contests, because the university takes partial credit for helping you learn the skills

you used to win the contest. For this reason they have a vested interest in telling others about your success. If you aren't already sponsored or mentored by a faculty member, get connected and ask to be mentioned in e-newsletters, the campus newspaper, or other campus media. Why? Because the more people that hear about your work the more people will be willing to help you going forward, plus you might just be approached by a company recruiter who happens to be an alumni. Departments can help with poster printing and shipping, providing university logo shirts, lab space, hardware and software, and lots of other little perks that can help you succeed. Plus you encourage other students to get involved next time which builds the reputation of the contest and the perceived value of your participation and recognition.

Putting it all Together on your Resume

While all of this digital media you are generating does some good by itself, the real opportunity for you is to bring it all together on your resume. The most impressive and impactful statements you can make on your resume are *quantified accomplishment statements*. A quantified accomplishment statement is a short sentence that says what you did, how much you did it, and that impacted x number of people. For each main activity section on a resume (such as a place of employment or a leadership position), I like to have three or four accomplishment statements (one bullet each), and each statement should have one or two numbers if possible or applicable. Some of these numbers can be estimates, but they really add credibility when you aren't afraid to be exact in the scope of what you've done. The following would be a pretty good approach to how to document your Imagine Cup experience on a resume. It is longer than I would recommend for any other single activity, but given its potential for differentiating you, it's probably worth the extra space:

Other Activities

As a member of a three-person all-women team, developed and produced a multi-touch software application using C#.net and Windows Presentation Foundation, that enables teachers and instructors to easily create multi-media instructional content.

- Project was award third-place in the United State Imagine Cup competition
- Application contained over 1,500 lines of original production quality C# code
- Application was user-tested and piloted by 10 middle school teachers and 60 students
- Project received over 3500 people's choice votes
- Project was mentioned in over 5500 Twitter and Facebook posts viewed by over 7 million readers and four press-releases and articles with a national audience:
    - http://www.microsoft.com/presspass/press/2010/apr10/04-26imaginecupwinners10pr.mspx
    - http://blogs.technet.com/b/microsoft_blog/archive/2010/04/26/imagine-cup-teams-laser-focused-in-last-moments-before-final-presentations.aspx

Behavioral Interviewing

The principle or theory behind behavioral interviewing is that how a person has acted in the past is a pretty good predictor of how he or she will act in the future. So an interviewer who is using a behavioral interviewing technique or asking behavioral-type questions will ask questions that start with "tell me about a time when you…". For college students, these types of questions can be difficult to answer if you haven't worked in industry yet. The good news is that working on a team project can provide lots of experiential stories that will satisfy an interviewer that you have the desired experience. See my [Behavioral Interviewing tutorial](#) for more general information about how to prepare for this type of interview.

So where does your social media marketing come into behavioral interviewing? As you are writing out the answers to the twenty or thirty anticipated questions, you can look at your Twitter, Facebook and blog posts to help you recall the challenges that you faced and overcame during the project. All of your social marketing is now a journal/diary that you can use to jog your memory.

Summary

If you are going to all the work to do an out-of-class project, then it makes sense to get every ounce of benefit from it. The self-marketing efforts described could take as little as 15 minutes to an hour or so a week, but they can double or triple the impact to your career if you start your marketing efforts from day one and keep it up until (or even after?) the project is over.