re.web at the College of William and Mary
Transcript of: "Just give it to me straight."

Hello all, I'm Susan Evans and it is Thursday, February 7, 2008. We're going to have to write a lot of new stuff for the new W&M web site. We all think of the web as an exceptional vehicle for sharing the essence of the College. To make this opportunity true for W&M, the words and phrases in our web page copy must be just right. We need excellent narration and storytelling about our history, our traditions, and what it's like to study, teach, and work on this special campus.

What should we be thinking about as we plan for the type of writing that we want on our new site? I'm already hearing noises in my head about "tone" and "voice." Should the copy be written in first person plural? Should it be written from the perspective of a student? What's the right balance between style and substance? And worst of all, should we worry that the narration will come out like a bunch of "grownups" trying to sound like they get it – my experience with my own two children, who are in this demographic, tells me they find that weird (although not quite as creepy as finding out we use Facebook).

Those who write about the Millennials and the social communities they've grown up with often agree that high school and college students expect unfiltered information. And so, my recurring nightmare is imagining a bubble over the head of a 17 year-old high school junior who's just clicked on the carefully crafted Campus Life section of our shiny new site. Would the words inside the bubble read, "Why can't they just give it to me straight?"

As I mentioned, I have two children in this demographic – a 20 year-old son who is a college student and a 17 year-old daughter who is a high school junior. Now, I could have asked them to about the web sites that tell them what they want to know using just the right language. But their eyes roll back in their heads when I bring up the W&M web project. Instead, I'm reviewing some of my favorite blogs. I'll be reading excerpts from two of the blog entries that inspired this podcast.

The first of the two blog posts I'm reading aloud was written last October by Voltaire Miran from mStoner. In his post called "Dreaming of Genies," Voltaire writes about how web 2.0 technologies like blogs, Flickr galleries, and YouTube pages have changed the nature of web communication, particularly who controls the message. In this excerpt, he references a conversation he had with W&M dean of admission, Henry Broaddus.

"But as one of our clients Henry Broaddus said, the genie is out of the bottle. We want control of the message, but we no longer have that option. This came home to me as I talked with some of our clients (again, clients, because it's all about our clients!) about how they chose us. Sure, they read the full-color RFP response and perused the glossy portfolio. But they also googled us, checked out our individual mySpace profiles, read our blog, and called the clients we didn't list as a references. Do I want control? I want control! But I can't have control!

And so I swallow my own counsel. In this day and age, controlling the message is a near-certain impossibility. Now, the best we can do—and the height to which we should always aspire—is to convey authenticity and deliver on the promise."

My second read-aloud is rightfully closer to home. In a post called Paving New Sidewalks Henry Broaddus provides sound advice to university communicators who may be accustomed to controlling the message. And now here's the exceprt from Henry's blog entry:

"*Inside Higher Ed* reports in a recent article that Northwestern now uses Gmail as its official campus email system. While this may appear to be a radical departure from the norm, in fact it's merely the latest iteration of institutions' efforts to harness the inertia of students' habits instead of competing with them.

The mantra of "make it easier for them to do what they're doing already" calls to mind the technique that Frank Lloyd Wright allegedly employed when deciding where to place sidewalks. He'd wait a few months for worn footpaths to appear, and then he'd pave those.

Naturally, the loss of control intrinsic to these changes makes many university administrators nervous. Although the public may think of admissions officers as the gatekeepers for the students, historically we've been more truly the gatekeepers for the message. That's less the case in a Web 2.0 world, and we're all still adjusting.

At William and Mary, we're pursuing an exciting redesign project for the College's website in order to assist with that adjustment. Votaire Santos at mStoner, the firm serving as our consultant for this endeavor, recently blogged about what the loss of message control portends for us all— students, universities, even firms such as mStoner—in a communications environment where the genie is out of the bottle. (Thanks to Voltaire, by the way, for the shout-out in the text of the linked entry.)

How do communicators retain their relevance? Voltaire has an answer: "convey authenticity and deliver on the promise." In other words, an abundance of information sources places an even higher premium on credible authorities. Let the students blaze the trail, but universities can still deliver the concrete."

Thanks for listening. Until next week.