It’s a fierce online battle for top talent as Singapore’s three universities roll out their recruitment juggernauts.

In reaching out to a tech-savvy audience, the National University of Singapore (NUS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU) and Singapore Management University (SMU), have made the Internet a focal point of their admissions campaigns.

Besides the usual print advertisements, NUS and NTU have also used the advertising machinery of Google, Yahoo and MSN as well as social networking sites such as Facebook.

SMU got the thumbs up from five out of the 10 readers aged 19 to 33 my paper spoke to – for their zesty testimonial online videos.

SMU employed local advertising firm Moving Bits to produce the 19 clips. In them, staff, alumni and employers of SMU graduates rhapsodise about the versatility and adaptability of its cohorts. These videos run for about a minute each and cost a total of $40,000.

Five readers said the advertisements were “hip and interesting”, with junior college graduate Malcom Ong, 19, singling out SMU’s “unconventional” tactic of using the videos as links to its faculties.

Some potential applicants, however, were not wowed by the online blitz. JC graduate Iven Peh, 19, for instance, felt the online information was too brief.

Overall, SMU spent “a few hundred thousand dollars” for its campaign this year, said Mr Alan Goh, director of the office of undergraduates admissions. NUS and NTU declined comment on their budgets.

Besides registering a huge jump in the number of total applicants – from 54,900 in 2005 to 91,900 last year – the admissions departments for the three universities have also expanded.

No need to advertise, say students

Prospective careers, scholarships, internships and reputation more important, they say

CLAIRE HUANG

The three local universities may have moved their competition for top talents from the traditional print arena to the Internet, but not every tech-savvy student is biting. While NUS and NTU advertised on popular websites like Google, MSN, Yahoo and even social networking sites like Facebook, SMU came up with their "youth channel" website, showcasing 19 promotional videos.

In a poll conducted on 10 potential students and graduates aged 19 to 33, half of those polled said they liked SMU's video ads as they were "hip and interesting", while the other half preferred the NUS campaign. Many of the top graduates of MS Chermaine Goh, 19, said SMU's videos were "the most interactive and personal". However, it seems that while the poll was split on who has the best ad, all of those polled said there was no relation between the most fancy online advertisement and their ultimate choice of university.

The potential students and graduates my paper spoke to said that while the advertising campaigns are innovative, there are other factors they would consider and prioritise. Of those who polled, seven revealed that they are more interested in the opportunities that the universities offer, and not in the strength of their advertising campaigns.

Most of those polled said practicality and recognition is what counts. Mr Iven Peh, 19, a student, explained: "I am looking for information regarding each course so I can apply. I would apply for NUS simply because it is reputed to be the best," said Ms Goh.

The three local universities are pulling out all stops to recruit top talent. Which comes out on top?

OVERALL STRATEGY

In March, SMU launched a "youth channel" featuring 19 videos in which graduates, staff and employers promote the school and its students.

This year, SMU stopped TV and radio ads to focus on online territory. Besides placing big ads in newspapers, it also put up giant billboards in its city campus.

NTU is adopting a multimedia approach to sell itself. This includes brochures, student prospectuses, online messaging and SMS. Huge, eye-catching ads are placed in the City Hall MRT station while four concept buses travel the streets - a first for NTU. Another first is the use of Bluetooth to reach out to tech-savvy students.

While focusing mainly on print ads, NUS also advertises on websites like MSN and Yahoo and on radio. This year's slogan, "That's the NUS difference", continues last year's theme.

The creative work was done by an ad agency as well as NUS students.

ONLINE APPROACH

Admissions website: It projects a hip image by calling it a "youth channel".

Videos: Short and sharp videos feature testimonies by the staff, alumni and employers of SMU graduates.

Social networking (Facebook, Yahoo and MSN messenger, etc.): None.

Admissions website: Info-packed but may be too text-heavy for some, at www.ntu.edu.sg/admissions/home/.

Social networking: Besides using MSN and Yahoo as in previous years, NTU now advertises on Google and Facebook.

Admissions website: Aside from the admissions info at www.nus.edu.sg/om/apply/, there's also another "gamified" one ("game") at www.jhao.sg.

Social networking: NUS uses rotating ads on Yahoo and MSN to reach out to its target group.

VERDICT

5 out of 10 polled liked its online look best. The website secured 30,000 hits in 10 days since it was launched.

None out of 10 polled thought its online site is the most attractive of the three universities.

5 out of 10 liked NUS online ads. However, 7 out of 10 said NUS is their university of choice, regardless of its ad campaign.

THE WINNERS: SMU AND NUS