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GMAT CLUB: SHARING THE GMAT EXPERIENCE

Over the past several weeks, business school professionals from GMAC member schools have been contacting GMAC to alert the organization to a Web site called GMAT Club (www.gmatclub.com) that appeared on the Web in December, offering GMAT preparation resources, study strategies, and a forum for discussion on GMAT-related matters. The site raised the suspicions of some business school professionals, who were concerned that it would be a forum for misguided information or, worse, trade in illegally procured or out-of-date but still copyright-protected test items.



GMAC's general counsel reviewed the site and deemed it legally compliant but for the omission of copyright information (which has since been added).

GM News, hearing of the new site, logged on, and found a self-professed "community" devoted to the discussion of how best to prepare for the GMAT. We found study strategies, puzzles, book recommendations (including a fiction section with titles by Hemingway, Steinbeck, and James), Web links to other resources, and forums.

Language on the site says it is administered by a person named "bb," who claims to be a first-year MBA student and to have scored in the 99th percentile on the GMAT. The photo of "himself" he displays on the site is a still of Tom Hanks from the movie *Forrest Gump*.

We were curious. Who is the mysterious "bb," and what is he out to accomplish with the GMAT Club?

"You can call me BB" says the Web auteur, who hails from Ukraine.

BB says he had the idea for the GMAT Club Web site just over a month ago, during the winter break from the first year of his MBA program. He quit his job after he was accepted to an MBA program, and moved to the United States in August, he stayed on campus over the break and found himself reflecting on his MBA experience so far, particularly his experience with the GMAT.

BB says he took about a year to prepare for the GMAT, using

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various study materials.

“I took a practice test in September [2001] and got a 540,” says BB, in a fast, fluent patter of Ukrainian–inflected American English. “I was really disappointed—I thought I would do better.”

His score motivated him to hit the books even harder, undertaking a months-long review of subject matter that yielded a score that surprised even him.

“I took the GMAT in February [2002], and I got a 750—that’s 99th percentile,” he says. “I couldn’t believe it—I mean, I thought maybe I had gotten a 680 or something, but it was 750.”

By the time he traveled to Moscow to take the GMAT, BB says he felt like a GMAT expert, having pored through his study guides and taken practice test after practice test.

“I always remembered the [questions] I had trouble with,” he said, “and I came back to them to see if I could get them right the next time.”

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Looking back on his preparation for the GMAT, BB thought it a shame that there were “generations” of GMAT test takers who would develop study strategies, refresh their skills, take the test, and then stop talking about the GMAT altogether. For every generation of test takers who had just taken the test, there was a rising generation just starting to prepare for the test who could benefit from the previous test takers’ knowledge and experience.

“So many people put so much effort into studying for the GMAT,” says BB, “and then they forget. I wanted to help others benefit from people who have taken the test already. A lot of people have really good ideas.”



He decided to build a Web site to facilitate the sharing of GMAT experience. He wanted the site to be a place where the GMAT generations could mingle and people would feel free to ask the questions foremost on their

minds. The site would be monitored carefully to ensure that the information it provided was sound and that users’ discussions were civil. BB asked some administrators at his business school for their advice, wrote a mission statement for the site, and recruited four friends to help him maintain the site.

“I didn’t want it to be like the *BW* [*Business Week* online] forums,” he explains. “That place is like the Wild, Wild West! It’s so full of arrogance—people saying, ‘Well, my score is this, and I got in here,’ and people making fun of each other and saying mean things. Then there are the sites that are just commercial, and they’re trying to sell you all kinds of products, and who needs that? I wanted my site to be up-to-date—not obsolete—and to be a place where smart people can talk and learn and the bad guys get kicked out.”

BB worked in information technology in Ukraine and had built Web sites as a hobby, so he used his skills to set up the GMAT Club. He purchased Magpie software to use for his books reviews section and downloaded free phpBB software for the discussion forums. He put inviting language on the GMAT Club homepage, asking users to take ownership of the site and discuss whatever aspects of the GMAT

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interest them. (A statement on the site warns participants that they may not post actual test questions.)

Then, using the pseudonym “Andrew Banko,” a modified anagram of his real name, he sent out a mass e-mail message to 500 business schools all over the world, announcing the launch of GMAT Club. And he waited to see what would happen.

“In the first few weeks, the site got a lot of traffic,” says BB, but the number of visitors has since declined. He isn’t quite sure why. “I can tell you that the MBA crowd is pretty tough and I’m still trying to figure out how to get them to come to the site. Right now, I am trying to show people that the site is up-to-date—new stuff every day—and a friendly place.”

Lacking the volume of participants needed for the site to be self-supporting, BB now posts much of the content himself, and it contains some solid recommendations of GMAT resources as well as some quirkier material. At the moment, the Puzzles and Intellectual Discussions forum contains posts ranging from the usual mathematics and logic questions to one called “Tomato vs. Truck” that traces the etymology of the word “truck” as a synonym for *vegetables*.

Undoubtedly, it will be difficult for BB to balance the demands of his MBA program with his desire to nurture the growth of GMAT Club. At the moment, he is developing a marketing plan for the site with the help of classmates to try to attract more users who will contribute content and keep the site fresh. He is also trying to publicize GMAT Club by posting information about it on *Business Week* online (despite his disdain for its forums) and the Princeton Review Web site.

Despite the obvious challenges ahead, BB is optimistic about the GMAT Club’s future. If the site attracts enough of a following, he envisions expanding into other markets.

“I could add an LSAT site,” he says.

—Jacqui Olkin

Visit the GMAT Club online at www.gmatclub.com.