

OCTANE

VOL. 5, 2021

ENROLLMENT MARKETING EDITION

ACTIONABLE INSIGHT
REMARKABLE TOPICS

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INSIDE

Digital Advertising—How
to Spend Dollars to Reach
Enrollment Goals

Focus Group Takeaways
to Improve Direct Mail
Communications

Does Enrollment
Marketing Need Its
Own Content Strategy?

LETTER FROM OUR

Founder and Chief Imagination Officer



Dear Octane Booster,

Over the years, it has been my privilege to share thoughts and ideas with many marketers. What has always struck me about marketers in higher education is how they combine optimistic resilience with adaptive innovation. They recognize the need for change—or as management guru, Marshall Goldsmith said, “What got you here, won’t get you there.”¹

Indeed, that is true today. In this edition of *Octane*, the articles speak directly to current enrollment marketing challenges. If you are evaluating resources spent on online ads, check out “Digital Advertising—How to Spend Dollars to Reach Enrollment Goals.” Two articles offer insight into influencer marketing and how it can expand brand reach. Get practical advice on effective website content strategies from marketing expert, Jay Baer’s best-selling book, *Youility: Why Smart Marketing is About Help Not Hype*. Learn how look-alike modeling can expand your lead pool and read about focus group takeaways for improving direct mail from a study undertaken at Georgia Institute of Technology.

If uncovering leads at all entry points and driving engagement is your marketing goal, don’t miss “The All-Important Search for Prospects: Why Forensic Lead Generation™ Matters.” This article discusses technology-driven ways to maximize organic web traffic, identify stealth visitors, and increase engagement with strategic remarketing.

Building a brand and supporting recruiting are two of marketing’s primary goals. Innovative marketers are always looking for new resources and fresh thinking to get them to their next “there.” If you want to trade ideas, brainstorm, or talk strategy about where you want to go, please reach out at my email address below.

Best wishes for 2022 and beyond,

Mike Wesner, M.Ed.

Founder and Chief Imagination Officer
mike.wesner@enrollmentfuel.com

¹ Retrieved from: <https://marshallgoldsmith.com/product/book-2/>

Innovative marketers are always looking for new resources and fresh thinking to get them to their next “there.”



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Octane the Magazine:
A publication of enrollmentFUEL

A collection of innovative thoughts from a team of people bonded to clients in a way to prevent the knocking that comes with the “one size fits all” Student Search and enrollment marketing strategies. Adding Octane to your thinking fuels creativity and releases positive energy among enrollment and marketing professionals.



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Digital Marketing for Higher Education

How Does Your Program Compare?

Rising costs, stagnant budgets, and lower-than-expected conversion rates are affecting enrollment marketing teams. With conditions like these, how do you recruit and win?

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THE ALL-IMPORTANT SEARCH FOR PROSPECTS:

Why Forensic Lead Generation™ Matters

By Nick Balk, M.S.



"You are out of business if you don't have a prospect!"

— ZIG ZIGLAR

"We are way down in inquiries, and I am not quite sure if there's a solution in sight,"

is a lament that I frequently hear in my conversations with enrollment leaders at all types of institutions. Partly because of the pandemic, and partly because Gen Z are savvy customers, collecting prospective students' names and email addresses is more difficult now than ever. Test optional policies have already reduced the number of prospects colleges and universities can collect from the College Board, ACT, and the GRE test-taker lists. Many schools report that the limitations caused by the pandemic to recruit in-person at high schools, community colleges, and college fairs has led to decreased inquiries. And last but certainly not least, with each year that passes, prospective students are more and more aware of common advertising tactics. They are increasingly cautious about volunteering their contact information to all but their favorite brands, and their purchasing behavior often occurs in the shadows.

Organic website visitors are strong prospects because this audience found you on their own. These are folks that, more than likely, typed a keyword into Google and found your site. That implies they already like you, were referred to you, or are interested in learning more about you. If your website is compelling enough to turn initial interest into action, organic web visitors may fill out a form or use your chatbot to ask a question. But more often than not, they depart as silently as they came, without identifying themselves.

This behavior is not unique to education. In a study conducted by Episerver, a global e-commerce company, 92% of consumers visit a "brand's" website for reasons other than making a purchase.¹

Potential students are a unique class of consumers. They visit your website to see what you have to offer, compare you to other options, and read content to learn. Forensic Lead Generation™ maximizes the benefits of organic web traffic. It uses digital tracking tools to

capture actionable leads and remarketing tactics to spur additional engagement. With your website as a focal point for lead generation, you no longer need to rely as heavily on list purchases.

Maximizing Organic Web Traffic

Much has been written about strategies and practices in past *Octane* magazines to increase traffic to your website. Search Engine Optimization (SEO) and Search Engine Marketing (SEM) are the two primary marketing tactics to achieve this. Good SEO requires expertise and a lot of legwork because search engine algorithms evolve constantly. Good SEM is an investment, and it can be expensive, especially for highly competitive segments such as MBA degrees and community college student recruitment. Like SEO, SEM requires expertise to maximize the ROI of media spends, and often colleges and universities seek external partners to assist with these specialized functions. Whether execution depends on your internal team, or an external partner, SEO and SEM are crucial steps to take if you want your website to turn into a lead generating machine.

IP Validation and Reverse Append Tactics

Did you know that it is possible to correlate the IP addresses of your website visitors to physical home addresses? This information is invaluable because you can send direct mail and digital advertising into the home when you have a physical address. You also can correlate household addresses of website visitors with home addresses in your CRM lists to qualify existing suspects.

We recommend tracking students who visit your website after receiving email communications from your institution as inquiries. At enrollmentFUEL, we identify these leads using our proprietary matchBACK technology. We also use inquiryDETECTOR, which is another solution for identifying new leads who found your school through a web search. Both solutions provide valuable intelligence to help marketing and recruiters focus on top leads and new prospects.

¹ Retrieved from: <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/study-92-percent-of-consumers-visiting-a-retailers-website-for-the-first-time-arent-there-to-buy-300390086.html>

Remarketing to Generate Repeat Engagement

One visit to your website indicates interest, but it takes multiple marketing touches to move leads from interest to engagement. Digital retargeting ads and direct mail are two effective ways to communicate with website visitors, motivating them to take the next step and fill out an online form.

Research on retargeting ads has shown the tactic increases engagement. In a 2017 study, Sahni, Narayanan, and Kalyanam found that retargeting advertising “causes 14.6% more users to return to the advertiser’s website in four weeks.”²

In their book, *Visible Learning and the Science of How We Learn*, authors Hattie and Yates explore principles and strategies of learning, and it offers insight for higher education marketing professionals.

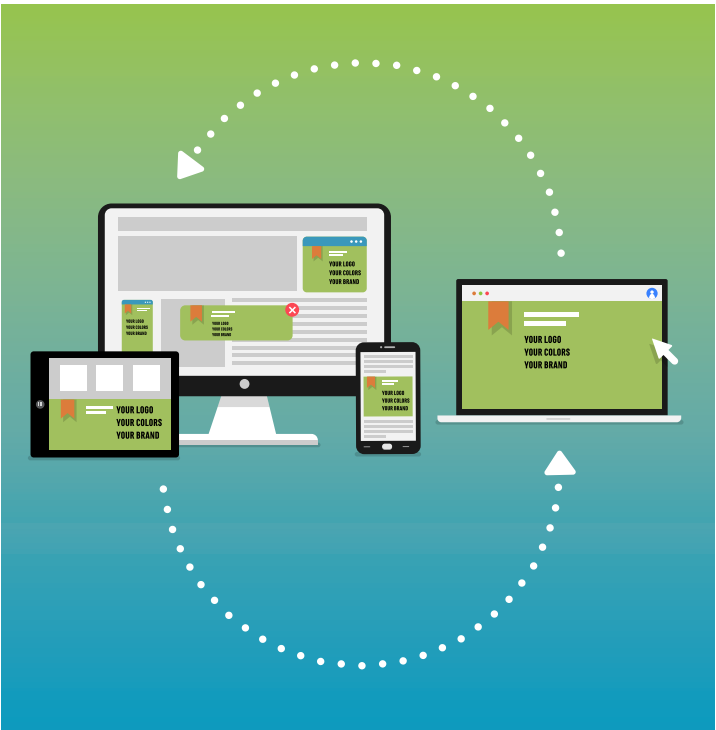
Creating engagement starts with brand recognition. Hattie and Yates would place visual cues like logos and school colors in the category of “sensory recognition.”³ Logos and color palettes often serve as the starting point for a “string” of information, with thoughts, associations, and memories linked together in a prospect’s mind. Repeated exposure to information helps to ensure a string forms.

Retargeting ads use repetition. By exposing a website visitor to your logo and a short benefit-driven message, you build brand recognition. As information is added to the string, prospects shift from simple associations (I heard of this school.) to more complex linkages (This school has the degree I am interested in and is well-known for its programs.). The more a lead thinks about your benefits, the more likely they are to take another step.

When using a remarketing strategy, there is a benefit to pushing repeat visitors to a specific landing page where your embedded lead capture form is placed in a prominent location. Keep the look and feel of remarketing collateral consistent with the look and feel of the landing page to make a solid cognitive connection. Effective landing pages are built around the framework of a persuasion architecture, presenting information that is benefits-focused, convincing, and easy to understand. When motivated leads take action, visual continuity between the form and subsequent communications link new information with existing strings.

Remarketing to past website visitors helps with brand recall and increases mindshare among existing leads. More importantly, they give you another way to generate new inquiries by turning a stealth visitor into a hand-raiser who fills out a form.

² Retrieved from: https://sics.haas.berkeley.edu/pdf_2017/paper_snk.pdf.
³ John Hattie and Gregory Yates, *Visible Learning and the Science of How We Learn* (New York: Routledge, 2014) 126 - 129.



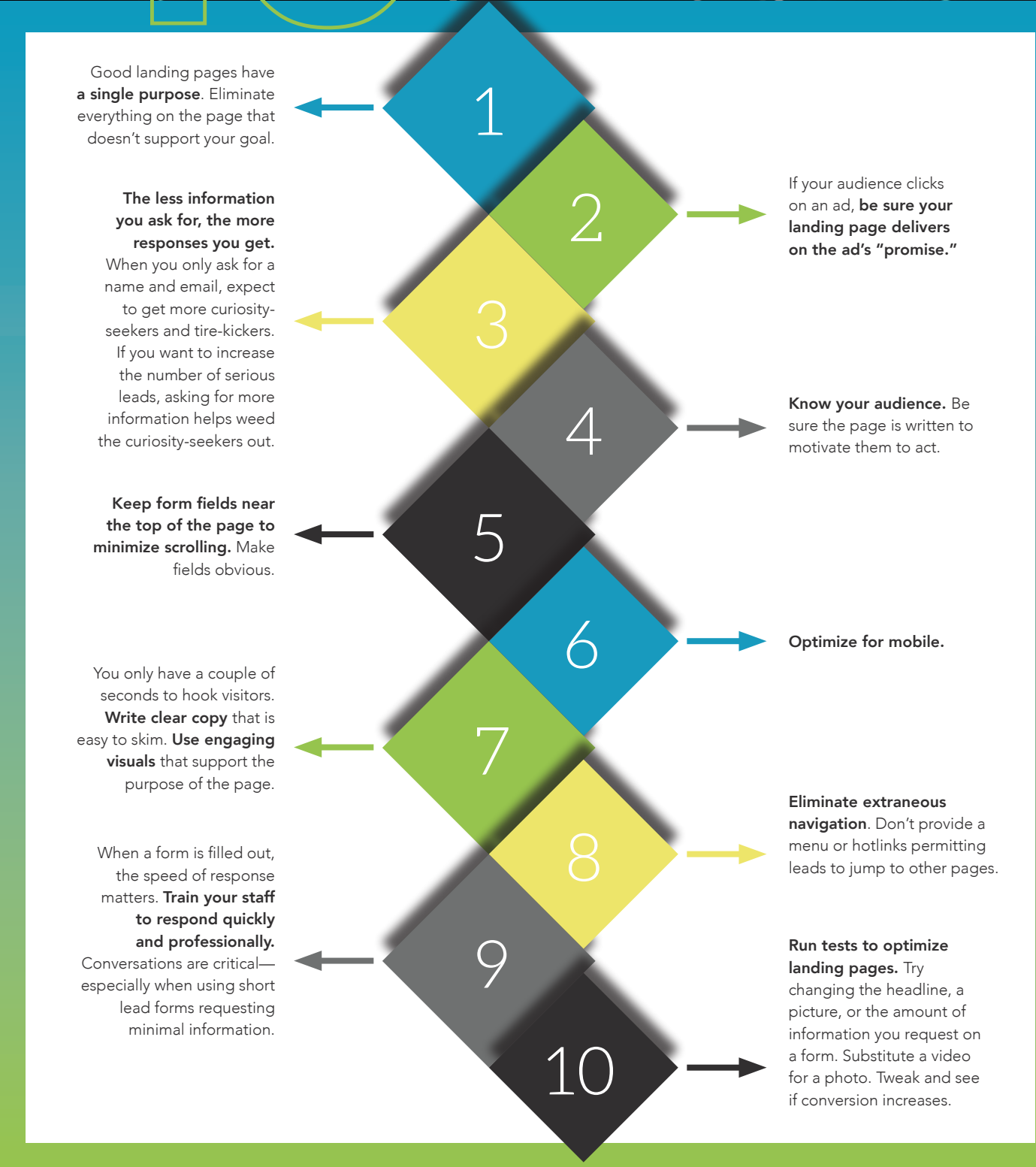
Forensic Lead Generation ensures you leave no rock unturned in your lead generation strategy. It helps you uncover leads at all entry points, including transfer students, graduate students, and adult learners, who are not commonly found on purchased lists—but who could be checking out your website even as you read this.

There is another benefit. At enrollmentFUEL, we believe “people recruit people.” Forensic Lead Generation helps you identify who came to your website and what pages they viewed. It allows you to pinpoint which leads on a purchased list took independent action to visit your website to see what your institution had to offer. This information arms your recruiters with actionable intelligence based on behavioral clues.

If you look ahead and see a day when fewer names will be available for purchase on lists, now is the time to investigate options. As the old saying goes, “The best way to get something done is to begin.”

Nicholas Balk, M.S., is the Regional Vice President of University Partnerships at enrollmentFUEL. Serving as the Director of Admissions at Albany College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences gave Nick insight on current recruiting challenges and how innovative digital strategies and tactics lead to success. For information about how institutions use Forensic Lead Generation™ to reach their goals, please contact Nick at nick.balk@enrollmentfuel.com.

10 Tips to Optimize Landing Page Design



3 REASONS WHY HIGHER ED NEEDS INFLUENCER MARKETING

By *Tori Canonge, M.S.*

What industry is expected to top \$13.8 billion this year?¹

Influencer marketing...and for good reason! Think about it this way—you have a friend who recommends a new restaurant to you. Because you trust this friend, you're much more likely to try the restaurant yourself, or at least do more research into it. Influencer marketing works in a similar way.

Think of it as word-of-mouth advertising, but online! Influencers use their platform (no matter how big or small) to drive your brand's message to a wider audience. It's all about real people telling real stories. When done correctly, your campaign can create emotional connections that traditional advertising methods are unable to match.

As a higher education institution, you have the opportunity to go beyond professional photographs and videos and show what your student life is *really* about when you activate influencers as part of your digital marketing strategy.

Not only does this marketing tactic spread the word about your school, but it also paints your brand in a more authentic way. And, there's data to back up that statement. According to a 2020 Matter Communications study, **61% are likely to trust recommendations from a friend, family member, or influencer on social platforms, and only 38% are likely to trust recommendations from a brand on social platforms.**²

¹ Retrieved from: <https://influencermarketinghub.com/influencer-marketing-benchmark-report-2021/>

² Retrieved from: <https://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20200526005058/en/Matter-Survey-Reveals-Consumers-Find-Influencers-More-Helpful-and-Trustworthy-than-Brands-During-the-Pandemic>

STILL UNSURE ABOUT USING INFLUENCER MARKETING AS PART OF YOUR STRATEGY? HERE ARE THREE THINGS THAT MIGHT CHANGE YOUR MIND:

1

Consumers Trust Word-of-Mouth More than Banner Ads

If you're only using paid digital ads, you're missing out on an extremely important puzzle piece—authenticity. According to Nielsen, 92% of consumers trust online word-of-mouth recommendations, but only 33% trust banner ads.¹

That's a huge trust gap!

¹ Retrieved from: <https://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/report/2012/global-trust-in-advertising-and-brand-messages-2/>

2

Influencers Aren't Just Celebrities

That student with 1,000 Instagram followers? They could be your perfect influencer!

A lot of brands assume that influencers need to have hundreds of thousands of followers to truly make an impact, but nothing could be further from the truth.

In fact, your best influencers are walking around your campus, living in your residence halls, and participating in school events. And the best news is that they have followers who trust them to share authentic content and quality reviews! That's a stark contrast from the "sold out" mentality a lot of people associate with celebrities who participate in paid promotions.

3

You Can Repurpose the Content

Has your school struggled to figure out what to post on social media?

Great news! You can repurpose the content from your influencer marketing campaign! (Just be sure to give credit where credit is due.) Your social media channels will be full of students sharing their experiences, which is something prospective students have shown to value when researching schools.

So, what are you waiting for? Dive in and see how you can start using influencers to show how awesome your school is! And if you find yourself needing some help along the way, enrollmentFUEL's team of experts would be happy to help build a customized influencer campaign just for you.

Tori Canonge, M.S., began her digital marketing career in 2014 when she started her first blog, which she built with the sole purpose of inspiring students to reach their higher education goals. After achieving success through content creation and digital marketing, she joined a full-service influencer marketing agency where she executed over 100 campaigns for some of the world's largest brands, including Georgia-Pacific, NFL, Unilever, Hasbro, Kraft Heinz, and many more. Tori currently serves as the Director of Social and Influencer Strategies at enrollmentFUEL. Contact Tori at tori.canonge@enrollmentfuel.com.

Digital Advertising:

How to Spend Dollars to Reach Enrollment Goals

By Lisa Branson, M.Ed.



Twenty-seven million dollars

That is how much the University of Phoenix spent on online advertising between August 2016 and January 2017, according to data published by Kantor Media, a data insight and consulting company.¹

You may read that number and wonder how you can compete, and if it makes sense to use scarce budget dollars on digital advertising as part of your recruitment marketing strategy.

Digital advertising can help you reach your goals, and here are a few ideas to help you spend wisely.

Brand Activation

Marketing guru, Seth Godin says, "A brand is the set of expectations, memories, stories and relationships that, taken together, account for a consumer's decision to choose one product or service over another."²

While every school has a brand, only a few have brands that are universally recognized, like Harvard. Most other institutions must activate their brand as part of their student recruiting effort. Brand activation follows brand awareness. It is the moment in time when a potential student makes the transition from passive viewer of advertising (which creates awareness) to interest.



A few years ago, household targeting and social advertising were considered optional add-ons, but that is no longer true. Today, almost every Student Search campaign contains digital advertising because digital advertising "primes" your audience for future communications.

By repeatedly exposing students and their families to digital ads with images of your logo, campus, and students, you gain the benefit of the "mere exposure effect," first brought to the attention of the academic world in 1968 by Robert Zajonc, Ph.D.³

Dr. Zajonc conducted experiments to determine if there was a link between repeated exposure to a stimulus and how much the test subjects "liked" the stimulus. His research, published in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, showed a direct correlation.⁴ Other research studies followed, also supporting Dr. Zajonc's conclusion.⁵

- ¹ Retrieved from <https://www.kantarmedia.com/us/thinking-and-resources/blog/adg-university-of-phoenix-leads-online-education-advertisers-in-paid-search>
- ² Retrieved from <https://seths.blog/2009/12/define-brand/>
- ³ Retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Zajonc
- ⁴ Zajonc, Robert B., "Attitudinal Effects of Mere Exposure." Journal of Personality and Social Psychology Monograph Supplement, Vol. 9, Issue 2, Part 2, (June 1966): 1-27
- ⁵ Retrieved from <http://socialpsychonline.com/2016/03/the-mere-exposure-effect/>



By repeatedly exposing students and their families to digital ads with images of your logo, campus, and students, you gain the benefit of the “mere exposure effect,” first brought to the attention of the academic world in 1968 by Robert Zajonc, Ph.D.

Simply put, the more we see something, the more we like it. By exposing your leads to digital ads, you prime them to be favorably disposed to future campaign communications. For example, students and parents are more likely to open an email or respond to a direct mail call-to-action if they have seen the web or social media ads from your school, often called an omnichannel approach to marketing.

Retargeting to Aid Conversion

Retargeting, also known as remarketing, is a specialized type of online advertising, where the visitor has already made an initial visit to your website. Code, in the form of a pixel, is added to your website. During a visit, the code drops an anonymous browser cookie, which allows website visitors to be served ads at a later point in time.

Is this effective? According to research published in the June 2019 edition of the Journal of Marketing Research, retargeting gets results.

The research was conducted by two professors at the Stanford Graduate School of Business, Dr. Navdeep S. Sahni and Dr. Sridhar Naryanan, along with Dr. Kirithi Kalyanam, the Executive Director of the Retail Management Institute at Santa Clara University. Their jointly published article is titled, “An Experimental Investigation of the Effects of Retargeted Advertising: The Role of Frequency and Timing.”

They conducted a large-scale randomized field experiment in partnership with a Canadian company called BuildDirect.com that sells to U.S. customers. In random testing, some website visitors were served retargeting ads for up to a month, while others did not get any ads. They found that following the initial visit, those who received retargeting ads returned to the website, increasing visitor traffic by 14.6% within four weeks.⁶

In their article, the team states that their research has the following implications for advertisers:

- Retargeting with simple, generic creative (meaning it does not have to specifically recall the visited webpage) attracts users back to the advertiser
- The effects of retargeting start immediately, within a day of leaving the website
- Approximately 50% of the total effect of advertising in the first week occurs within the first two days—a finding which emphasizes the role of immediacy in retargeting campaigns.

However, there is another remarketing option. You could:



⁶ Sahni, Navdeep S., Narayanan, Sridhar, and Kalyanam, Kirithi. “An Experimental Investigation of the Effects of Retargeted Advertising: The Role of Frequency and Timing.” Journal of Marketing Research (JMR), Vol. 56, Issue 3, (June 2019): 401-418.

This option is more targeted, which means you focus precious marketing dollars on students who are more likely to take the next step and convert.

There are several ways to identify website visitors. Some schools have technology in place linking their CRM database with their website, allowing them to identify website visitors. For schools that currently don’t have this capability, enrollmentFUEL has developed matchBACK, a solution that allows us to identify a significant portion of website visitors by matching their IP addresses with home addresses to pinpoint web visitors within your inquiry pool. Armed with this information, you can remarket to a more select group to increase overall campaign ROI.

In this type of campaign, we often recommend that our clients invest a few extra dollars in identifying ad clickers and add those clickers into your standard communication flow for inquiries. For example, if the inquirer clicked a “Visit Us” ad, it makes sense to send communications encouraging a visit.

Look-Alike Modeling Combined with Household Targeting

Look-alike modeling is a way to find potential new leads by analyzing demographic data from past enrollees and using it to find people who have similar characteristics. This technique can be effective in markets where it’s difficult to find prospective students, e.g., adult and graduate school markets. The cost of running a 30-day test is relatively low, so it may be something to consider. It works like this:

- You provide a list with 500 to 1,000 past students who matriculated at your institution
- Students are run against a database to identify similar households
- These households are served ads for 30 days
- Track to see who clicked on the ads

Improvement often starts with an experiment, so there is value in considering how this could work for you.

Last Thoughts

No matter what the size of your ad budget, it pays to ensure your website is optimized. Well-optimized sites get more organic search traffic, which reduces the need to advertise.

Digital marketing is important. However, the best campaigns use a variety of strategies to meet your students and alumni where they are. Digital marketing works best when it is used in conjunction with other methods, like emails, mailers, social postings, and personal phone calls.



Lisa Branson, M.Ed., is the Vice President for Enrollment Systems, and is currently enrolled in a doctoral program. She is an expert in recruiting, financial aid, and all aspects of Student Search, including digital advertising. Lisa has run many pay-per-click advertising programs, and she is always happy to share her experiences with you. If you would like to discuss strategies, please contact Lisa at lisa.branson@enrollmentfuel.com.

Focus Group TAKEAWAYS

to Improve Direct Mail Communications

By Becky Tankersley, M.Ed.

As educators, assessment is required for growth, improvement, and compliance. As communicators, analysis is crucial to determine the success of a campaign. Yet, sometimes those of us in higher education marketing find ourselves overlooking the basics: assessment and analytics.

The analytics piece has become quite simple thanks to our digital landscape. We can quickly measure everything from open rates and clicks to applications and yield. While this data is an important cog in the machine of outreach and recruitment, nothing can replace taking time to talk to actual students and ask them how they think your institution's communications are working.

My team at Georgia Tech recently conducted a series of focus groups and online surveys to gauge student reactions to a variety of recruitment collateral and yield pieces. Faced with shrinking marketing budgets, we sought to answer one question in particular: **Is print valuable, or is it dead?** In a climate where expanded search buys and mass marketing result in communication overload and stuffed mailboxes, what, if anything, catches a student's eye and grabs their attention?

While conducting focus groups is time-consuming, the information we gathered was extremely beneficial. We have already utilized the feedback when creating travel brochures and targeted mailers for the year ahead. We now hope to help others in our industry by presenting our findings at regional conferences, in campus presentations, and right here in *Octane*.

METHODOLOGY

Three focus groups were held over a year. The first focus group was held in April 2019, with first-year summer students involved

in a living-learning community (LLC). The second focus group, conducted in October 2019, included first-year and second-year students involved in a variety of LLCs. The final focus group, held in February 2020, specifically engaged first-year students from rural areas of Georgia.

In addition, an online survey was sent to 818 first- and second-year students in an LLC program. 115 students participated in the survey, with a response rate of 14 percent.

The April and October sessions lasted approximately one hour each, with an open discussion format. Print pieces from a variety of institutions were on display, including everything from postcards to viewbooks to unique yield mailers. The discussion was led by our graphic designer, who asked open-ended questions regarding the samples spread throughout the room. The communications manager observed and typed notes as students made comments and suggestions. Here is what we learned.

#1 Think outside the box

With more than 4,000 colleges and universities in the United States, students receive an outlandish amount of mail during their high school years. Students told us the majority of this mail went straight to the recycle bin. In some cases, a parent or guardian would first look through the mail, then pass along interesting pieces to the student. Most students said unless a college was already on their radar, or had a print piece that "stood out," the mailer quickly found its way into the trash.

This led us to ask, "What makes a piece stand out?" Information in plain white envelopes and standard postcards were often tossed aside. What did catch their eye were unique mailers created using die-cut technology to make the physical

dimensions of the piece unusual. Examples included trifold pieces, hexagons that folded out to a larger image, and pop-up postcards. Students liked the use of clear envelopes because it let them know what to expect and often enticed them to open it (although some expressed concern over the environmental sustainability of such envelopes).

When asked about viewbooks, students liked when colleges made the pieces pop by die cutting the college name into the cover or included an unexpected touch, such as gold foil on the college logo. They were turned off by overly large brochures, with some stating that these pieces reminded them of travel magazines.

Lastly, students responded well to anything they could have a tactile experience with, such as die-cut pieces that were mailed flat but could pop out to assemble an object, such as a box or paper mascot.

YOUR TEAM'S TAKEAWAY: Don't be afraid to stretch your creativity, and your budget, to create unique pieces. Years ago, the name of the game was to send as much mail to as many students as possible in hopes of increasing applications and ultimately, yield. This outdated method no longer works in today's digital consumer landscape. If budget is an issue, be more strategic in your lead generation, targeting specific subsets, according to your institution's priorities. Our team found success in mailing to half as many students as we had in the past and giving those students a unique experience and exclusive opportunity to engage with our brand. If you go the extra mile to create a particularly unique piece, don't hide it away in a plain white envelope! These have "recycle bin" written all over them. Create a separate mail panel and insert the piece into a clear envelope instead. (There is an environmentally-friendly option available!)

#2 Keep the buyer's journey in mind

I once heard someone describe higher education as a unique industry because "our customers and our product are the same: students."

We live in a digital age where companies like Amazon and Google seem to know what consumers want to buy before the consumers themselves even know it. Students expect outreach and communications to be tailored to them, and where they are in the buyer's journey.

When students are in the prospect stage, they aren't looking for deep dives into mission statements or longform student profiles. Instead, they are looking for broad overviews highlighting what majors are offered and how the campus looks. One student stated, "The first thing I looked at was the list of majors. Nothing else matters if my major isn't there."

While students are looking broadly in the prospect stage, they seek, and expect, targeted content by the time they are admitted and in the yield stage. At this point in their journey, they are ready to read more, research more, and do a deeper dive into overall campus ethos. Admitted students no longer needed to receive broad-based brochures with sweeping

photos and generic content. They do enjoy receiving "stuff" from schools to which they had been admitted. Examples of well-received items included socks, posters, USB drives with useful content (some mentioned personalized content would be ideal), and even stickers. Students wanted to show those around them where they planned to attend by using the items they received.

YOUR TEAM'S TAKEAWAY: Always operate with an awareness of where students are in the enrollment funnel. A prospect doesn't need a lot of dense text that links them to the college catalog and explains how their dual enrollment credits will transfer. Prospective students need broad content focused on the primary factors that will lead them to investigate further and consider your institution.

An admitted student is ready to engage more deeply with your institution. They want to know more about life on campus, the types of opportunities available, and what kind of return on investment they can expect by earning a degree at your school. Admitted students are excited and relieved to have successfully navigated the admission process. Targeted items that congratulate them on their achievement, whether in the form of posters, stickers for their car or laptop, socks, or a USB drive they can use, all played well with this audience.

#3 Tell a story

Segmented communication and personalization have an essential place in enrollment marketing. However, stories are what really stand out to students. Students are hungry for stories from current students about life on campus and how their college experience has shaped them as a person and set a path forward for their future. This generation of students is wary of mass marketing efforts from enrollment professionals—they want to look behind the curtain and know what life is really like on campus.

High achieving students stated they knew the academic offerings were strong at all of the institutions to which they were admitted. It was the other offerings, such as housing, clubs, community, and campus culture, that mattered deeply in their



college selection. Students want to know what, aside from academics, makes each campus different. Will they fit in, and will they find community?

To answer this question, students said they often went to YouTube to search for “a day in the life” videos of current students. Organic content was vital in this area, but students said they would still watch a video even if the college produced it.

Students utilized video as a tool to learn more about the student stories on campus. They liked reading student blogs when available. And when it came to printed materials, they enjoyed reading a brief story about the students included in the piece, in three to five sentences or less.

YOUR TEAM’S TAKEAWAY: Ditch the boilerplate copy and tell a story! Dry, traditional content with altruistic catchphrases and mission statements feels trite to this audience. Find current students who are willing to share, and let them tell your institution’s story for you. Use student highlights in your viewbook and other print collateral. Don’t have access to a professional video team? YouTube, Instagram, and Snapchat are ideal places to house organic content. Ask some of your current students to do a social media takeover for a day, and let them highlight spaces on campus, what classes are like, and the clubs they are involved in. This is also a great way to show what housing is really like and give a glimpse into the dining options available on your campus. All content doesn’t have to be professionally polished, so long as it tells a true story of what life is like for your current students.

#4 Focus on photography

Students want to see photos that show them the campus. When presented with a variety of layouts, students leaned towards those with full-bleed photos that showcased the campus, culture, and architecture. Students would rather see the campus than see close-up images of individual students—especially if those students may or may not be actual students at the school. However, if those individuals are current students, they want to read a few sentences about that particular student’s story.

Photography is especially crucial for students who live far away from campus and may not have a chance to visit, since these images set the stage for what they think the campus will be like. Photos that show some scale (e.g., a building with people walking by as blurred images) were also well received.

Photographs used for a virtual tour of campus were, again, helpful for students who could not visit campus. However, some commented that virtual tours could sometimes make a campus seem larger than it is.

YOUR TEAM’S TAKEAWAY: Avoid stock photos and eliminate the standard “three in a tree” photo of students on campus. Focus group students were instantly critical of staged photos, especially those that displayed a perfect blend of all types of students congregating in one spot. Several students stated they

felt colleges tried too hard to show a perfect mix of all kinds of students on their campus, while that may not be the reality of the institution.

Prominently feature your student center, primary classroom buildings, and labs in your collateral. Highlight unique spots on your campus and use photography to bust any myths that may surround your campus. If you have an urban campus, but considerable greenspace, highlight that feature. If you are a suburban campus with access to your city’s downtown center, highlight that opportunity. Just like storytelling, photography will tell the real story of campus life to your prospective students.



“Though it is nice to know that you’d be joining a community with rich, interesting traditions, I personally cared more about pictures of the campus/buildings, student life and seeing students involved in meaningful work.”



“Seeing a lot of nice pictures of campus does draw students to a school and offers them a window into what life would be like as a student here.”

#5 Don’t underestimate a personal touch

We may live in a digital age, but a personal touch still matters. Students enjoyed receiving specialized pieces that included their preferred name in a location other than their address. They expect to be targeted as individuals, not just another name on a list.

Aside from print and email communication, students also liked to receive phone calls, emails, and/or texts from current students. Having someone reach out to them to talk about life on campus was a valuable way to learn if a school was the right fit for what they’re looking for in their college experience.

YOUR TEAM’S TAKEAWAY: When personalizing your print pieces, ensure you are using the student’s preferred name rather than their first name. Using the first name is a major signal to a prospective student that you don’t really know them as a person.

Tips for Conducting Your Own Focus Group

Focus groups are a treasure trove of data and feedback on your recruitment efforts. Our first focus group was not perfect, but with each group, we refined the process. Here are a few tips to help you get started:

- **Choose your focus area.** Where do you most want to gather feedback? We focused on print pieces, but research can also be done on digital collateral and other recruitment efforts. Once you identify what area you want to assess, you can then formulate questions for your group.
- **Collaborate with campus partners.** Look for a campus unit that has a diverse group of students with a wide variety of interests and majors. Ask if you can talk with their students for an hour or so and offer to provide them copies of feedback you gather.
- **Provide lunch (or breakfast).** College students respond well to incentives, such as a free lunch or breakfast. Budget to provide food as a thank you to the students for their time.
- **Be clear.** Be transparent with students and campus partners about what you’re doing. It is unethical to quote students or gather data without their knowledge. Let them know ahead of time who you are, what office you work with, and what you hope to learn by talking to them.
- **Prepare a qualitative and quantitative assessment.** If your focus group will be conversational, designate one person to lead the conversation and another to jot down notes during the discussion.
- **Create a brief survey of 10-12 questions.** Send it to attendees, as well as those who could not attend, and collect more in-depth feedback with a bigger sample size.

- **Refine, refine, refine.** After your first focus group, you’ll find many ways in which you could have presented information more clearly or asked better questions. Note how you plan to do things differently on the next round, and plan accordingly.
- **Identify different cohorts for each focus group.** While current students are wonderful participants, they do not paint a full picture of your recruitment efforts. Many students do not choose to enroll on your campus. Consider surveying other groups such as campus visitors, high school counselors, or parents. Each of these groups brings a unique point of view to the table that can help paint a more complete picture of how recruiting efforts are working in particular areas.

An added bonus to conducting a focus group is the opportunity to connect with your audience. We often get lost in the day-to-day shuffle of administrative tasks, and we gradually lose touch with those we are tasked to talk to if we aren’t careful. Spending time with students proved to be a big boost to our team as a whole.

Becky Tankersley, M.Ed., is the Director of Communications for Strategy and Enrollment Planning at the Georgia Institute of Technology. After starting her career as a television news producer, she shifted to higher education, serving in a variety of roles in undergraduate admission and communications. She is an active member of the American Association of Collegiate Registrar and Admission Officers (AACRAO), serving as a content coordinator, presenter, and author of newsletter articles. Becky can be reached at becky.tankersley@gatech.edu.



SEO FUNDAMENTALS: What Every Higher Education Marketer Should Know

By Alison Walls, M.A., and Rory Green, B.A.

In the digital age, every higher education marketer needs at least a basic grasp of Search Engine Optimization (SEO). Put simply, these are the strategies that your marketing team can use to improve your institution's ranking on search engines like Google. The higher your rank, the more likely potential students are to come across your content and trust it.

Even if you are working with an outside entity to assist you, it's helpful to be familiar with six common terms often encountered in SEO discussions.

- **Black hat/white hat:** Denotes two types of contrasting SEO practices. "Black hat" refers to practices that violate Google's quality guidelines while, as you might guess, "white hat" practices are in line with the same guidelines
- **Search Engine Results Page (SERP):** Also known as the page of results presented back to you after searching for a given topic
- **Search volume:** the number of times a keyword was searched in a given time frame (often monthly, depending on the tool used)
- **Crawling:** the process by which search engines discover and "read" web pages
- **Short-tail keywords:** queries of just a few words, usually fairly common, broad in scope, and difficult to rank
- **Long-tail keywords:** longer search queries, usually three or more words and more specific

UPDATE CONTENT WITH FRESH NEWS

Posting press releases on your website is an effective and low-cost way to update content and boost SEO efforts. Download "Support Recruiting Strategies with PR," to discover seven ideas for press release topics.



Great SEO doesn't happen overnight, but a few simple tips will take you far!

#1 Keep Everything Accessible in Three Clicks or Less

A hard-to-navigate site, full of nested pages, isn't optimized for users or for SEO. One simple question to start with is this: can everything on your site be accessed within three clicks or fewer? Start with a homepage that offers easy access to all important categories for current and potential students, alumni, and other stakeholders.

#2 Understand On- and Off-Page SEO

On-page SEO is probably what you've heard the most about. This is all about the elements of your website that you control (such as code, metadata, web copy, etc.). Off-page actions, which can happen on other sites, can also positively impact rankings and improve authority. For example, a member of your faculty writes a guest article on another authoritative website, and then links references within the article to other information that is found on your site, reinforcing your site as a credible place with authority.

#3 Take Advantage of Internal Link Building

While much of SEO strategy focuses on external links (links to your site from trusted sites, which build your authority), internal links can make a big difference. Broken internal links can disrupt the crawling process or signal that your site is poorly updated (or just poor quality overall), which influences your institution's ranking. Too few internal links to a page can make it harder for users and crawl bots to find it, but too many links raise red flags that your page or site might be spammy. Aim for user-friendly links at a moderate rate.

#4 Pay Attention to "Google My Business"

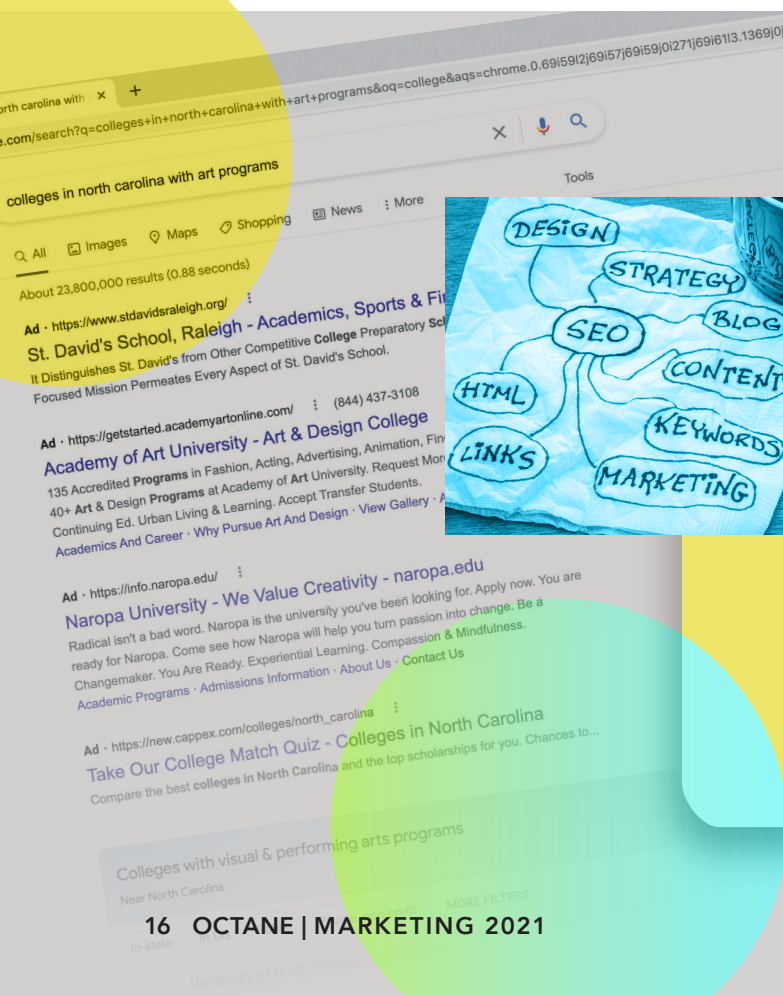
"Google My Business" profiles are no longer solely for business. Today, they also are effective for higher education because this is a free and easy way to improve visibility for your college or university—especially for local students. If you look at your Google listing, and see the phrase, "Claim this Knowledge Panel," you may want to be sure that Marketing has access to the listing, because keeping an active, high-quality profile can improve your page ranking.

#5 Remember that Quality Matters

Trying to trick the algorithm with strategies like keyword and link stuffing simply doesn't work. In fact, it's actually more likely to hurt your ranking than help it! Focus on providing a steady stream of high-quality, strategically produced content with multiple components. This can include a quality social media presence with a unique voice, guest author blog posts where alumni share stories and wisdom, regularly updated information about campus news, and much more. The key is to focus on relevance and quality; the algorithm can tell, and so can users and potential clients.

SEO is about getting traffic, but for higher education marketers, the goal is to get the right traffic to build a thriving digital presence for your institution to help you reach your goals.

Alison Walls, M.A., and Rory Green, B.A., are members of enrollmentFUEL's marketing operations team, actively working on a variety of SEO challenges for external and internal partners. Alison worked in higher education for over a decade, serving in a variety of roles, including time spent as the Director of Student Life. Rory has over 15 years of programming, website development, and SEO experience. Contact Alison at alison.walls@enrollmentfuel.com, and contact Rory at rory.green@enrollmentfuel.com.



WHO IS JAY BAER, and Why Might You Care?

By Linda Bishop, MBA

If you're a higher education marketer looking to grow enrollment, then it's worth thinking about an idea from Jay Baer. Baer is not an expert in enrollment management, Student Search, or financial aid packaging but a recognized thought leader on digital marketing and the customer experience. Jay is also a New York Times best-selling author, who has written six books on these topics. He has consulted with a diverse group of corporate clients, such as the Grand Old Opry, Cisco, and Comcast, and has worked with multiple schools, including Arizona State University, Indiana University, Oregon State University, and Central New Mexico Community College.

Baer believes the marketing strategies used by enterprises and educational institutions are becoming less effective. He thinks organizations need to rethink their approach, and he makes a compelling case for creating change in his book, *Youtility: Why Smart Marketing is About Help, Not Hype*.

Media Fragmentation

In 1977, Americans primarily watched three channels: ABC, CBS, and NBC. In *Youtility*, Baer reports Happy Days on ABC was the number one television show in the country that year. It had a 31.5 rating, so 31.5% of all Americans living in a household with a TV watched that program.¹ Mass media advertising made it relatively easy for advertisers to push their message out through the limited number of channels and reach their audience. Today, it is a different story. The number of available channels has proliferated. In addition to television channels, people now get information from social channels and on mobile phones. According to Baer, "the fracturing of the media landscape" is responsible for a disconcerting new reality that reduces the effectiveness of traditional marketing, which relies on mass media to push messages out. As he puts it, "You can't promote to people you can't find."²

¹ Jay Baer. *Youtility: Why Smart Marketing is About Help, Not Hype* (New York: Penguin Group, 2013), 10.

² Ibid.

Reaching Potential Students

Higher education marketers and enrollment leaders who market to high school students are facing new challenges. In past decades, it was relatively easy to identify leads. Students who took the SAT or ACT signaled their interest in attending college and consented to permit schools to purchase their contact information for marketing purposes.

Demographic shifts are impacting the number of potential leads. In *Demographics and the Demand for Higher Education*, Nathan D. Grawe reports the results of research by the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE). The study predicts growth in the number of high school students until mid-2020s. "Following this run-up, the aftershocks of the birth dearth will create a sharp nine percent pullback," Grawe writes.³

The reduction in the size of the lead pool resulting from birth dearth will be compounded by another factor. According to The National Center for Fair and Open Testing: FairTest, over 1,000 schools do not require a standardized admission test, and that number is growing.⁴ As more schools become test-optional, fewer students will take tests, resulting in more lead pool shrinkage.

If, in the future, it becomes harder to identify and reach a shrinking pool of easy-to-purchase leads, what action should you take to grow enrollment? According to Baer, you must move from over-dependence on marketing for top-of-mind awareness to an approach that creates a new state of mind he calls "Friend-of-Mine Awareness."⁵

³ Nathan D. Grawe. *Demographics and the Demand for Higher Education* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2018), 15.

⁴ Retrieved from: <http://fairtest.org/actsat-testoptional-list-tops-1000-colleges-univer>

⁵ Baer. *Youtility: Why Smart Marketing is About Help, Not Hype*, 24.

Awareness

Baer says this about top-of-mind awareness: "The idea is that you need to have a sustained level of marketing and messaging, so when a customer is ready to buy, they think of your product first."⁶

Billboards, radio and TV ads, digital display advertising, email blasts, and direct mail all contribute. Baer does not recommend abandoning any of these. He writes, "Top-of-mind awareness isn't inherently flawed, but it isn't very surgical, and it hasn't evolved much despite changing technologies."⁷

Friend-of-mine awareness adds an additive layer to your marketing mix. It is a happy state of affairs that occurs when your inquiries have a question, you have the answer, and the inquiries find the answer online. At a critical moment, you bring value. Instead of acting like a marketer, you act like a friend and trusted resource. Being there for people when they need you, and bringing useful information, creates Youtility.

The Zero Moment of Truth

It is Wednesday night. Dylan is stretched out on his bed, watching YouTube. He's a high school senior, and college is on his mind.

He's been doing a lot of online research lately, trying to decide where he wants to apply. Dylan has visited several campuses. During one tour, the student guide talked about how she had studied abroad and how meaningful it

⁶ Ibid. 7.

⁷ Ibid. 8.

had been for her. That got Dylan thinking that he might like to study abroad.

Since the tour, he has watched twelve YouTube videos posted by college students, where they shared information about their study-abroad experiences. After three days of watching, Dylan decides he wants to study abroad. However, he is worried that his parents can't afford it. A new question forms in his mind. How can I pay for study abroad during college?

Dylan returns to the website of the school, where he met the student guide who talked about study abroad. Their study abroad web page has two sparse paragraphs on the topic, and Dylan doesn't see information answering his question. He jumps to a different school's website. Once more, the study abroad page disappoints him.

In rapid order, Dylan visits five websites before hitting pay dirt. A school he is considering has in-depth information about their study-abroad programs, including how students can pay for the experience.

Dylan soaks up all the available information. He decides this school is a good fit for his goals, jumps on the Common App website, and applies that night. Google has labeled the

point in time when online research can influence a purchase decision as the "Zero Moment of Truth," or ZMOT.⁸

As students move forward in their journey to select a college, they have many questions, including:

- Does this school have the degree I want?
- Will I like living in this location?
- Can I afford this school?
- What kind of activities are available?
- Will this college prepare me for a job?
- Will this college help me get a job when I graduate?

Often, your future students research in stealth mode, looking at your website without actively responding to your marketing. While interest exists, students aren't at the point where they are willing to identify themselves. During this crucial period, Youtility matters, because information shapes perceptions.

⁸ Retrieved from: <https://www.thinkwithgoogle.com/marketing-resources/micromoments/zero-moment-truth/>

Friend-of-mine awareness is an additive layer to your marketing mix. It is a happy state of affairs that occurs when your inquiries have a question, you have the answer, and the inquiries find the answer online. At a critical moment, you bring value. Instead of acting like a marketer, you act like a friend and trusted resource. Being there for people when they need you, and bringing useful information, creates Youtility.



Here is a quick exercise to assess Youtility at your institution. Choose one broad topic that matters to your inquiries. Then, select a commonly asked question as the starting point to frame a conversation. If your goal was to persuade the inquiry to apply, how would you answer the original question? What other questions would follow, and how would you answer those?

Now, look at your website. Does it thoroughly answer all the questions that came up in your mock exchange? Does the content contain enough real information to create trust? Does it make a compelling case for choosing your institution, or are there information gaps?

While it would be great if students reached out to recruiters for answers, it is far more likely they are going to look at your school's website. However, at many schools, websites provide minimal information on important topics. All too often, enrollment and admissions teams are not even involved in website content planning.

Recruiting success is affected by content decisions and depth, so it is important for both the marketing team and the enrollment team to be part of the content development process. If a member of the team grumbles about a lack of resources for a website content upgrade, don't let that derail you. Start somewhere. As the old saying goes, "If you have to eat an elephant, do it in bite-sized pieces."

For schools who see the value in building more Youtility into their marketing, Baer recommends starting with three cornerstones⁹:

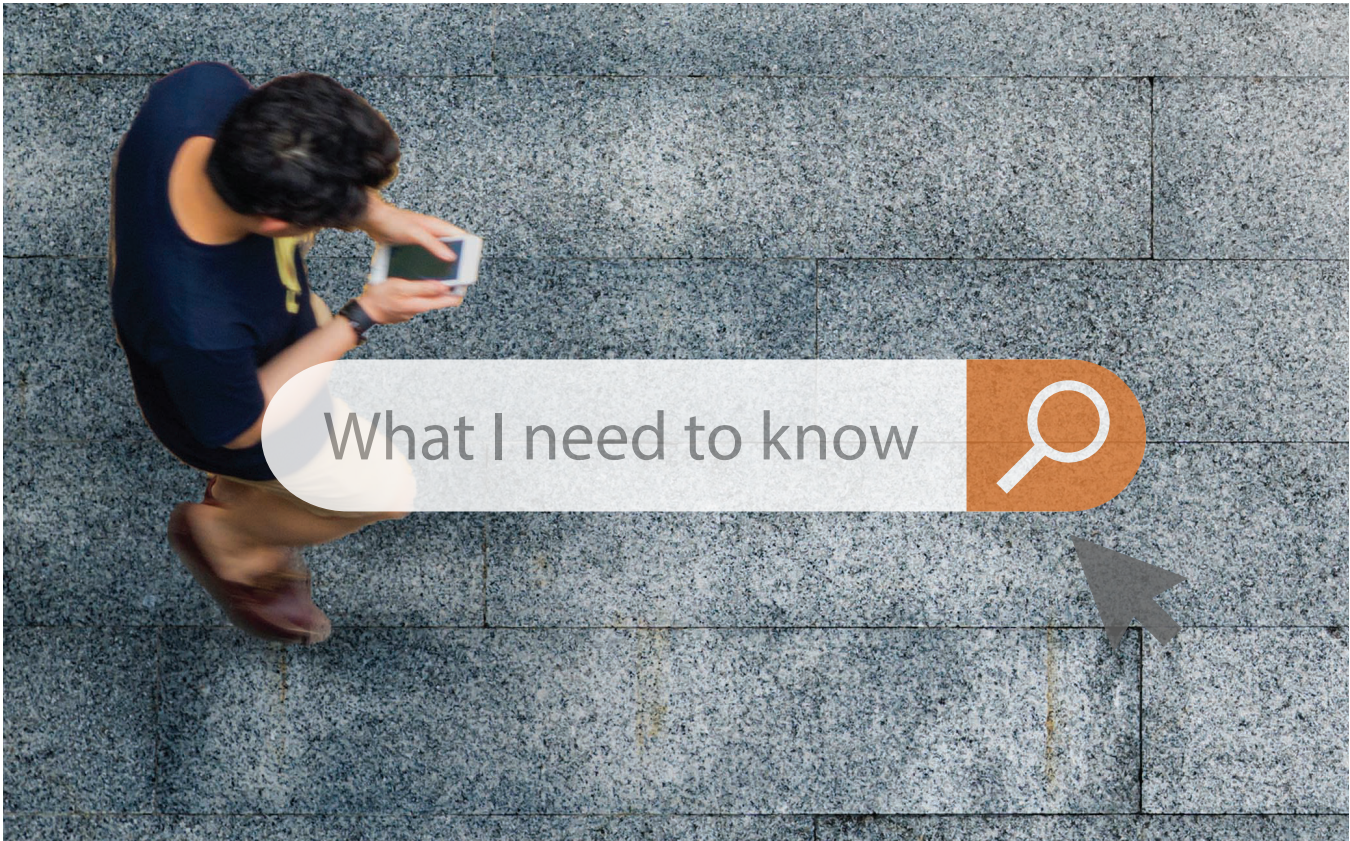
1. Give people the opportunity to inform themselves how and when they wish, instead of providing information funneled through contact mechanisms determined by your institution.
2. Think in terms of radical transparency. Provide answers to every question a student or parent could ask—before they think to ask it.
3. Be relevant in real-time by providing "self-serve" options for information.

We talked to Jay Baer about the challenges he has seen at the schools where he has consulted. He said, "The schools that succeed best are those that seek to assist the potential student and her/his family in making the best possible decision, regardless of the outcome of that decision. Helping beats selling!"¹⁰

At enrollmentFUEL, we agree.

⁹ Baer. Youtility: Why Smart Marketing is About Help, Not Hype, 44.
¹⁰ Jay Baer. Phone conversation. November 11, 2019.

Linda Bishop, MBA, is the editor of Octane magazine at enrollmentFUEL. She is a subject matter expert on marketing campaign strategies, content marketing, and integrated marketing, using both online and offline tactics, and marketing automation. Contact Linda at linda.bishop@enrollmentfuel.com.





CAN LOOK-ALIKE MODELING REPLACE TRADITIONAL LIST PURCHASING?

By Mike Wesner, M.Ed.

As the enrollmentFUEL team talks to Marketing and Enrollment Vice Presidents around the country, one topic comes up again and again, and that is how to find leads when fewer students take tests. We have researched this topic since 2018, when I wrote an *Octane* article titled, “360 Degree Digital Advertising Strategies.” There has been an obvious trend for many schools to explore becoming test-optional, and the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated this timeline. Many enrollment strategists feel we are still a few years away from not being able to buy names from testing agencies. Still, schools are already starting to feel the strain in this cycle because the volume for certain profiles of names has been limited.

At enrollmentFUEL, we have drawn on our experience of finding graduate students and non-traditional students to help schools grow programs. With such campaigns, you often don’t have known lists and may want to budget for specialized and innovative tactics as you plan your future strategies. You also may be pleasantly surprised to learn the outlook for finding leads is good and can cost you less than purchasing names from traditional sources.

Look-alike modeling, combined with digital advertising, is one answer to consider. *Why?* Because institutions often need to expand their audience and find potential students who profile a certain way and act like your enrolled students.

Building a new audience starts much the same way as a good name buy marketing strategy. Enrollment history and regression tools help us identify attributes desired within qualified populations. Today, and in the future, such attributes inform us how to build the algorithmic models when list purchasing is not an option.

Simply said, we review your enrollment history to find your future students. We can now do that with either known (traditional) lists or with newly modeled names that provide you households—which can then be served digital ads across several channels. Historical data is analyzed using multivariate regression against a large reference set for various traits. Evaluations are made to identify patterns among demographic, geographic, and activity/behavioral characteristics. Once patterns are identified, the software

returns a list of suspects that closely mirror your current and most recently enrolled students’ households. In addition to the characteristics mentioned above, these suspects can be further identified based on various *household* characteristics such as income, buying patterns, and educational level. While you will not have test scores with this data set, the data is still very rich with information.

However, there can be some challenges if you’re not prepared. For example, in a look-alike list, you receive household-level data, so you won’t immediately have access to the student’s name or their email. For these reasons, we recommend when recruiting a look-alike population, you start Student Search with digital advertising (banner ads and social media ads). enrollmentFUEL also recommends using tools to identify who visits your website. These tools let you hear the background symphony and will become the bedrock of what we think will drive Student Search campaigns in the future. Your team will work in newly formed Student Search strategies where:

- Modeling builds lists
- Digital ads drive students to your website
- Visit activity is captured to create your new-found inquiry pool, constructed from modeling, and identifying stealth visitors

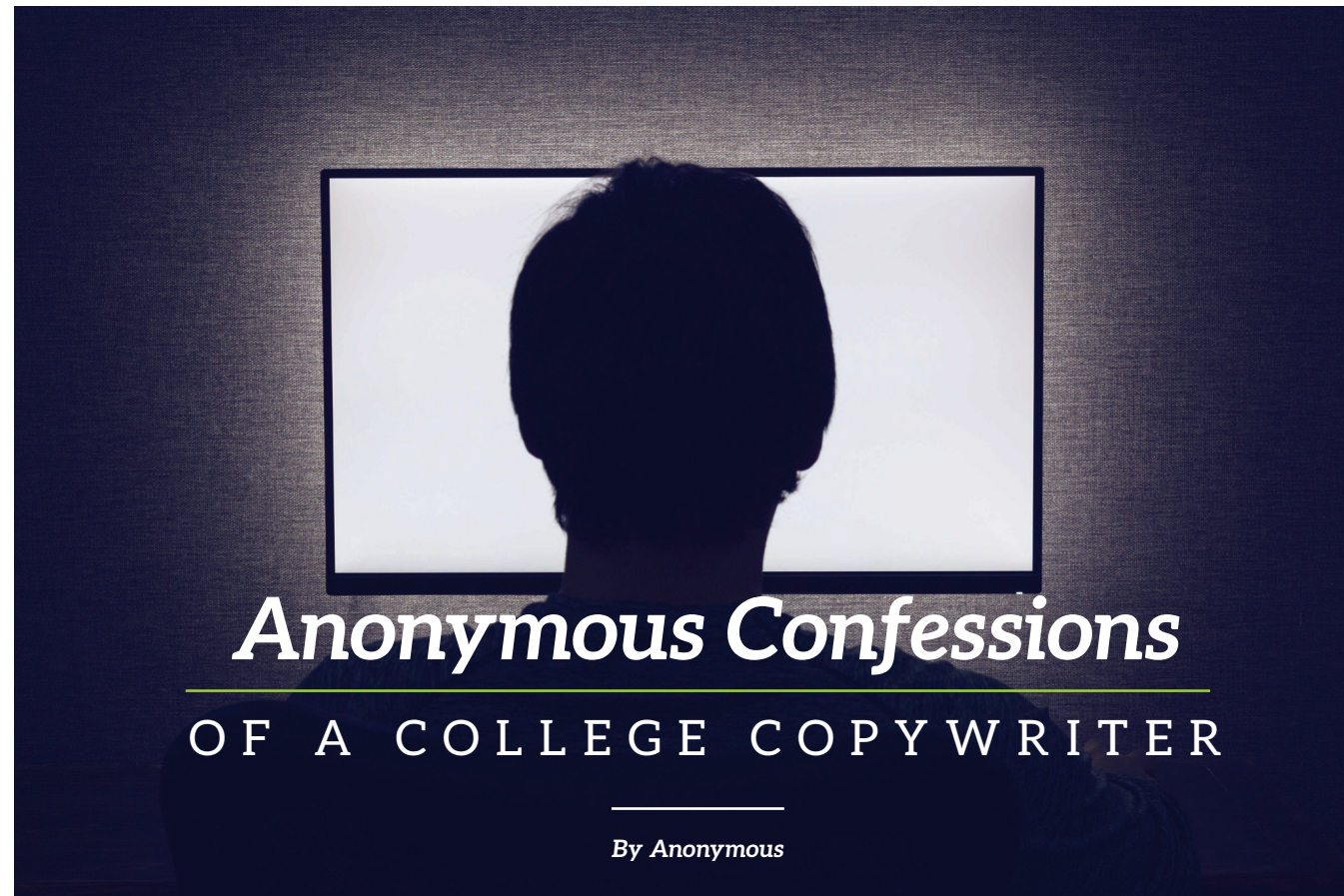
Today, the technology we use to place code on school websites tells us who visited at the household level with good precision. Traditionally, we matched this data against existing purchased lists (enrollmentFUEL’s matchBACK solution). For some client-partners, after a student visits their site, we fire off a mail piece. It is printed on demand and sent to the home we identified, with a call to action to visit a specific landing page with a form. Triggered mailings and slowly batched emails help you build on initial interest and capture personalized information.

More than 1,200¹ schools have already dropped testing requirements. Some institutions made the choice because administrators decided they were not the most effective way to gauge a student’s potential. For others, it was a response to the pandemic. Whatever the reason, the number of leads traditionally available will shrink over time. In the absence of lists, look-alike modeling can help you build your traditional and non-traditional inquiry pools in a smarter and more economical way.

If you would like to learn how enrollmentFUEL uses look-alike modeling to help enrollment teams reach their goals, contact me, and I will be happy to share more.

¹ Retrieved from: <https://www.insidehighered.com/admissions/article/2020/08/10/nacacstatement-seeks-make-test-optional-admissions-clear>

Mike Wesner, M.Ed., is the founder and Chief Imagination Officer of enrollmentFUEL, and the creator of the company’s annual holiday called BOAT DAY. He has imagined better ways to do Student Search and recruitment for more than 15 years. You can reach Mike at mike.wesner@enrollmentfuel.com.



A good copywriter should deliver fresh, effective content that captures the voice of your school. Here are some tricks and tips to help you get the most out of your hired scribe or your in-house team.

Your feedback is fuel to a writer. Positive or negative, the more specific your comments, the more likely you are to get the copy you want. If you're worried about hurt feelings, try phrasing your edits in the form of "what if" questions. A few good probing questions about the copy can prompt a whole host of new ideas.

First draft equals big picture. Does the copy accomplish its purpose? Does it connect to your brand and marketing strategy? Does it evoke emotion? Will it engage your audience? Is it interesting? Playful? Current? Cohesive? That's all first-round stuff; use the second draft to sharpen focus and for any—gulp—grammar gaffes. Don't forget to note things you like about the copy: word choice, phrasing, imagery, stats, CTAs, etc. This lets your writer know what you'd like to see more of in the future.

Writers like knowing what has performed well in the past. If you have the data related to past performance, share it. This is particularly important for email campaigns: Which subject lines prompt higher open rates? Which links are getting clicks? This information is crucial to informing future writing assignments and improving outcomes for you.

Look who's talking. There's plenty of qualitative data to be gleaned by asking current students what they think about new (and old)

Nobody reads ads. People read what interests them. Sometimes it's an ad.
—Howard Gossage

Copy is a direct conversation with the consumer. —Shirley Polykoff

On the average, five times as many people read the headlines as read the body copy. It follows that unless your headline sells your product, you have wasted 90 percent of your money. —David Ogilvy

Decide the effect you want to produce in your reader. —Robert Collier

Make it simple. Make it memorable. Make it inviting to look at. Make it fun to read.
—Leo Burnett

copy. These don't need to be formal focus groups, you can tap those campus ambassadors who are hanging around the office. They'll tell you exactly what they think. Food goes a long way with students, so a bag of snacks or some cookies can get them talking. Of course, a gift card is even better! Then share the intel with your writer. A good copywriter will learn, grow, and use the knowledge.

More than a number. There are only so many stats a student can take; they want stories. So, keep a running list of timely, inspirational anecdotes about students, faculty, and campus happenings. Things you hear in the hallway. In staff meetings. From counselors. Just jot down a few words in a notebook or on a whiteboard and let your writer flesh them out in future emails, invites, and brochures.

Last Thoughts. Professional copywriters want to do a good job and are heavily invested in their creative craft. With minimal effort on your part, you can give your writer the resources necessary to create copy that crushes it for your school.



Does Enrollment Marketing Need Its Own Content Strategy?

By Linda Bishop, MBA

Marketing's goal is to build a school's brand and promote that brand in the marketplace. Enrollment's goal is to bring in the next class and meet revenue goals. At the early stages of a student's "buying journey," content alignment happens naturally between marketing and enrollment. Both departments are focused on providing basic information to position their institution as the best alternative for students seeking the school's unique set of benefits.

The website works as the main content "library" and holds the answers to basic questions asked by students, such as:

- Where are you located?
- What does the campus look like?
- What majors do you offer?
- What is student life like?
- What is the cost of an education?
- What resources do you offer to help students get a job?
- What study-abroad programs do you offer?
- What are your athletic programs like?
- How do I arrange to visit your school?
- Where would I live?

Imagine this situation. Mallory and her parents have a long-standing tradition on Wednesday night where her dad makes spaghetti with meatballs. During dinner, the conversation turns to where Mallory wants to go to college. Mallory confesses that she loved her visit to your school, but she is worried that she will struggle academically. Her dad tells her he is confident she can do anything. Her mom then encourages her to go ahead and apply if that is the school she really prefers. Mallory hears them, but she is still not confident about applying.

To get answers, they might reach out to an Admissions Counselor, but the odds are better they will look online for information. In these moments, a content strategy specifically designed to support the enrollment management process can help you win the hearts and minds of future students.

After dinner, Mallory goes to her room. She finishes an essay for her AP class in American History. Before she shuts down her laptop, she decides to look at your website and goes to the page called "Academic Support," providing information about resources available to students. There, she spots a link with the title "How I dropped the mic on microbiology."

Mallory clicks the link. It takes her to your school's Instagram page and a highlight story. She is introduced to a student named Jayden. He loved English and history but had always struggled with math and science. He was interested in microbiology and decided to take an introductory course, even though it scared him a little.

The class wasn't easy, but his professor helped him map out a plan to be successful and take advantage of all the resources at your school. Jayden passed the course with a solid B. Best of all, he gained a new measure of confidence about trying new things that would stick with him for his entire life.

Learning about Jayden made Mallory feel like she could also succeed at your school, and that night, she sent in her application.

As the student moves down the path and through the stages of applying,

acceptance, depositing, and ultimately matriculation, many questions pop up after conversations with parents, friends, and trusted advisors.

They include:

- How will I make new friends?
- What do I do if I am undecided about my major? Or find out I don't like a major once I start taking classes?
- What happens if I have trouble understanding a course, or worse yet, I am failing a class?
- Will I like my professors?
- What if I get sick and miss class?
- What if I hate my roommate?
- Is it hard to get an internship?
- How will I find out about clubs and organizations that I might want to join?
- What will it feel like to be so far away from home?

Dr. Weinschenk recommends presenting important points early on, because most online readers only read 60% of an article.

In his book, *How We Decide*, Jonah Lehrer digs into the research on decision making. In his chapter, "The Brain is an Argument," he states decisions are reached after the brain engages in a series of sharp, internal arguments. Lehrer writes, "While the cortex struggles to make decisions, rival bits of tissue are contradicting each other. Different brain areas think different things for different reasons. Sometimes this fierce argument is largely emotional, and the distinct parts of the limbic system debate each other. Although people can't always justify their feelings, these feelings still manage to powerfully affect behavior."¹

Uncertainty is stressful for students. To get answers, they might reach out to an Admissions Counselor, but the odds are better they will look online for information, like Mallory did. In these moments, a content strategy specifically designed to support the enrollment management process and your school's positioning can help you win the hearts and minds of future students.

The Content Marketing Institute defines content marketing as "a strategic marketing approach focused on creating and distributing valuable, relevant, and consistent content to

¹ Jonah Lehrer, *How We Decide*, (Boston, First Mariner Books, 2009), 198.



There are many different ways to present content—pictures and snack-sized posts on social sites, videos on YouTube, and online articles that can be found on campus blogs are just a few of the options.

attract and retain a clearly defined audience—and, ultimately, to drive profitable customer action.”²

In many ways, content marketing is like advertising. In *What Sticks: Why Most Advertising Fails and How to Guarantee Yours Succeeds*, authors Rex Briggs and Greg Stuart state that for an advertising program to be effective, you must know why customers hire the category of products, why customers choose a specific class of brands, and why customers ultimately choose a specific brand.³

It is their third point—knowing why customers ultimately choose a brand—where higher education marketers should take an active role in ensuring available content helps convert inquiries into matriculating students.

Even when schools have a lot of content distributed across multiple platforms, gaps can still exist in your content marketing strategy. To identify gaps, here are questions to consider:

- What decisions will be made by students?
- What information will be considered when making those decisions?
- What positive conclusion do you want the student to draw about your school?
- Where will they look for this information?
- Does this information exist in some content form already? Or will it need to be created?
- How can you be sure that they find it?

Once you have identified content gaps, the marketing team can implement a plan to fill them.

Three Factors to Consider When Creating Content

Susan Weinschenk is a behavioral scientist with a Ph.D. in psychology who uses brain science to understand and predict how people behave. In her book, *100 More Things Every Designer Needs to Know about People*, the practical advice she offers can be used to improve content marketing programs.



The brain is more active when content is presented as a story. When stories have happy endings, the brain releases dopamine, making people feel optimistic and more willing to take action.

First, the brain is more active when content is presented as a story. When stories have happy endings, the brain releases dopamine, making people feel optimistic and more willing to take action.⁴

Second, reading is not hardwired into our brain. It is something we learn. However, people are hardwired to pay attention to faces and to listen to the emotional nuances conveyed by speech. This helps to explain the popularity of videos and podcasts, and why they are powerful tools for content marketing.⁵

⁴ Susan M. Weinschenk, Ph.D., *101 More Things Every Designer Needs to Know About People*, (San Francisco, New Riders, 2016) 106.
⁵ Weinschenk, *101 More Things Every Designer Needs to Know About People*, 99-100.



Third, there are many different ways to present content—pictures and snack-sized posts on social media, videos on YouTube, and online articles that can be found on campus blogs are just a few of the options. When you are writing an article, Dr. Weinschenk recommends presenting important points early on, because most online readers only read 60% of an article.⁶

Summing It All Up

Most schools have a content strategy, though the sophistication of the strategy varies. As students journey toward matriculation, different questions arise. Effective content strategies help to build a brand and provide information to answer questions, educate potential students on your value, and eliminate uncertainty. There is value in listing

⁶ Weinschenk, *101 More Things Every Designer Needs to Know About People*, 90.

common questions and concerns and then evaluating where better content marketing could help win hearts and minds. Tell stories with happy endings and make people feel good about your institution. Create videos and podcasts, because we are hardwired to pay attention to faces and listen for emotional nuances. When writing longer-form content, be sure the most important points are presented early on, since many people stop reading before reaching the end.

Content marketing has come a long way since 2004 when Merriam-Webster declared “blog” the dictionary word of the year. Channels come and go (remember Myspace?), but the basic marketing principles of sharing useful information to help students understand the value of your school is not a fad—it’s a strategy to help savvy marketing professionals achieve student recruiting goals.



People are hardwired to pay attention to faces and to listen to the emotional nuances conveyed by speech. This helps to explain the popularity of videos and podcasts.

Linda Bishop, MBA, is the editor of *Octane* magazine at enrollmentFUEL. She is a subject matter expert on marketing campaign strategies, content marketing, and integrated marketing, using both online and offline tactics, and marketing automation. Contact Linda at linda.bishop@enrollmentfuel.com.

Managing Your Online Reputation—7 Questions to Ask

By Jay T. Fedje, M.A.

#1 Am I able to monitor real email activity?

Because it is crucial to capture your email activity, it is equally important to distinguish between opens by *real* recipients and clicks from email provider Spambots and filters. It is a challenge to assess data in a world where there are ever-evolving rules, tricks, and techniques used by email providers to filter real versus spam email. This “chess-match” with email providers will never end, so be aware and plan for the game.

#2 Have I planned for alternative communication channels in my non-responder tactics?

Direct mail, social media banner ads, calling campaigns, and SMS texting (when appropriate) are other methods to consider. When emails don’t work as well as you hoped, have you planned (and budgeted) for an alternate method to recruit these suspects?

#3 Am I monitoring and cleaning suspect/inquiry email lists from hard bounces, undeliverables, and opt-outs?

Each email campaign should be analyzed upon completion, and all adverse email outcomes should be assessed and acted upon. Hard-bounces, opt-outs, and undeliverable emails should be removed from the database, and those prospects should be placed in an alternate communication flow.

Your domain reputation score is a rating assigned to your institution by email providers, like Gmail. It is based on algorithms and monitored activities, such as open rates. The higher the score, the more likely your emails will land in a recipient’s inbox. Lower reputation scores increase the likelihood of ending up in junk mail or folders.

Since email is a critical channel for enrollment marketing, leaders should be asking seven questions to promote deliverability and manage reputation scores.

#4 Am I periodically using an email validation/verification software to identify undeliverable emails and potential problems?

Bad emails will invariably creep into your database. Email addresses of today’s suspects go stale, quickly. You also might have collected “spam traps” over time. These emails are designed to test if the sender is, in fact, a spammer. Email senders, like you, should occasionally weed out the emails that give you headaches. Blocker software like GlockApps or Email on Acid can help identify undeliverable emails so you can remove them before your next email campaign.

#5 Am I utilizing a reputation scoring software to monitor my domain score?

You can be confident that a high percentage of your recruits are using Gmail. So, it is critical to make sure your reputation score with Gmail is solid so that your emails hitting Gmail addresses get to the right folder. You can continually monitor your school’s domain reputation with software like Sender Score, Google Postmaster, or Microsoft Smart Network Data Services or SNDS. Every college or university must have staff members tasked with monitoring their school’s reputation score. Be aware that admissions isn’t the only department affecting a school’s score. When you consider all the departments that send mass email campaigns (Development, Alumni, Athletics, the President’s Office), there are countless opportunities to damage your reputation score if it is not regularly monitored and managed.

#6 Am I monitoring from where my prospective student names are coming?

How is the prospective student’s data being captured and provided to me? Too often, enrollment managers buy lists of prospect names that have been sitting on the “data shelf” for months or years. As a result, email addresses erode and become outdated, causing nothing but problems for your campaign. Asking the list provider *when* the names were captured and *how* they were captured is critical (and too often overlooked). Some suspects fill out a survey or complete a college assessment test (SAT or ACT), so you’ll know *when* and *how* those names and biographical data were captured. Be aware when you are getting compiled data from old student surveys. Other lists are generated by collecting student data from associations (church denominations or school data files). When you can find out the “when” or “how” information about the data on a list, take extra steps to clean the list after your purchase.

#7 Am I measuring the “shelf-life” of students’ email addresses?

While home addresses are relatively stable, students’ emails change more regularly. You may have old, outdated, or abandoned email addresses in your system. If you get a street address wrong, you pay a return mail fee, but there are no future negative implications for sending mail. If you get emails wrong too often, it will impact your ability to send future emails to appropriate inboxes of students who are actually viable.

Jay T. Fedje, M.A., serves as Vice President of Client Services at enrollmentFUEL. He is a seasoned leader with expertise in enrollment management, strategic planning, funnel development, university branding, targeted student search, CRM implementation, predictive modeling, financial aid leveraging, communication plan development, retention modeling, organizational structure, and market expansion. To learn more about online reputation management, contact Jay at jay.fedje@enrollmentfuel.com.

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