PROVING THE VALUE OF DIGITAL MARKETING in Higher Education

HOW DATA-DRIVEN DIGITAL MARKETING DELIVERS
The Case for Data

“The future of education is data driven,” says Richard Cul-tatta, acting director of the Office of Education Technology for the U.S. Department of Education.

A recent EvoLLLution article echoed that sentiment by stating, “More than ever, marketers in higher education need to account for the effectiveness of their marketing expenditures. With increasing budget pressures and competition in the marketplace, traditional direct marketing strategies — print advertising, direct mail, email and other unsolicited contacts — will not produce enough right-fit students necessary to meet enrollment and retention goals.”

Higher education has been undergoing a transition for many years. Increasing competition and rising prices have forced students to become more selective in their school choice, and alternative methods of learning such as MOOCs are having an impact on the pool of prospective students. Higher education marketing has moved from glossy brochures to social media and the web to capture prospective students’ attention.

While these external influences have had a major impact on higher education marketing departments, so have internal challenges. Competition inside higher education institutions is fierce. Colleges and universities are becoming more selective about spending and more aggressive in recruiting prospective students. This means higher education marketers are more accountable than ever to the President and Board of Trustees to be able to detail how their strategy impacts the bottom line.

Unlike other institutional departments such as admissions, development, and academics, marketing is often viewed as a cost center. Yet, marketing touches every department and has a significant impact on the institution’s success or failure. To prove their value, marketers must emphasize the data behind their decision-making and show results with real numbers.

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Define Success

“Throw it at the wall and see if it sticks,” is an expression we’ve all heard. Many believe this is the “science” behind marketing—creative but without real strategy or results. The truth is a great marketing strategy is never thrown at the wall; it knows exactly where to aim.

That’s why higher education marketing leaders must not only detail their data-driven planning in an annual marketing plan, but also ensure that it is the foundation of every campaign. This can be achieved by developing action plans with defined metrics and goals for each project.

For higher education marketers, recruitment is a common driver for campaigns, however it’s not purely a numbers game anymore. A recent education marketing benchmarking report by Enrollment Builders noted that “recruitment marketing priorities have shifted; it’s no longer enough to focus on attracting and admitting a large number of students. Getting the right students enrolled and setting them up for success is vital in today’s extremely competitive environment.”

Many institutions appear to have missed getting the right students in 2013, with less than half meeting their enrollment goals, according to a study by CUnet.

If one of your annual marketing goals is to increase the number of qualified prospective student inquiries or leads, you must first define what a qualified lead is. Then it’s important to understand the marketing cost per lead. According to a recent Noel Levitz report, four-year institutions spend an average of $2,433 to recruit an undergraduate student.

SPOTLIGHT

Chamberlain College of Nursing

Using a targeted approach to recruitment marketing, the College created a detailed segmentation strategy to separate inquiries by:

- Source
- Degree Program
- Level of Engagement
- Web Activity

Based on the segments, the college implemented 4 email programs that drew from 80 custom HTML templates. Their targeted marketing strategy won the “Best Lead Nurturing Program” Markie Award.
Once you’ve defined lead parameters and costs, you can segment campaigns and your budget. When marketers used to go after large pools of students, leads were often just qualified as hot, warm or cold, based on the student’s interaction with the college. That’s no longer enough. Today, you must also qualify leads based on your institution’s goals and what types of students you are seeking. By using data to target and qualify students, your results will improve.

**Measuring Performance**

An industry standard for measuring performance is the Net Promoter Score. The Sloan Consortium asserts the Net Promoter Score “is a powerful tool and process for identifying strengths and challenges, improving a culture of service excellence, and responding to stakeholder concerns with actions that demonstrate commitment to improvement.”

Cornell University has been using the Net Promoter Score as a measurement in its alumni office for several years. The University holds 1,400 events a year for alumni, parents, and friends. They wanted a cost-effective measurement tool to find out if the events were engaging alumni. The results allowed them to see if events were working and to identify alumni promoters and brand ambassadors. They have since expanded using the Net Promoter Score for alumni recruitment efforts as well.

These types of data-driven and targeted approaches should be used for all marketing initiatives to ensure marketing leaders are armed with the information needed to effectively speak about strategy and results.

**Research**

In order to engage students and alumni, marketers need to stay abreast of market research, online trends, and best practices within the industry. Of course, they also need to track their interactions with students and alumni to see which channels their key audiences are using and how they interact with information through those channels.

By conducting research that identifies brand personas and keywords, marketers can use this data to increase organic search placements and build successful pay-per-click campaigns.
ENGAGE EFFECTIVELY

Higher education marketing is more than just reaching prospective students; it is about building lifelong relationships with students from prospect through alumni. In order to effectively maintain that relationship, the student needs to stay engaged with the institution. Higher education marketers need to show how they are keeping students engaged throughout each stage of the student lifecycle.

Prospective Students

Today’s prospective students have grown up online. They research colleges and universities through Internet searches and use social media to stay connected to their network. According to a Google Think Education study:

- 1 in 4 prospective students never look to sources outside the web during their research
- 83% of query paths begin with a non-branded term
- Search is the second most used resource behind the school’s website
- 75% of prospective students use social media as a resource when deciding where to enroll

In the past few years, use of mobile devices has skyrocketed and prospective students are among the most prevalent users. A recent Noel Levitz report noted that 68% of college-bound students have visited a college website on a mobile device and Google Think Education noted that one in eight education searches was conducted on a mobile device in 2012.

The proliferation and increasing usage of mobile means having a mobile strategy that includes a website optimized for various devices is no longer optional for higher education marketers. Responsive design websites have become best practice as they are an efficient way to reach both desktop and mobile audiences with one website.
With so many students on the web researching institutions, it’s the marketer’s challenge to determine the most effective way to reach and communicate with this audience. By conducting research that identifies brand personas and keywords, marketers can use this data to increase organic search placements and build successful pay-per-click campaigns. Tracking campaign results such as impressions, clicks, and conversion rates against measurable goals will highlight successes, areas of improvement, and influence future campaigns.

**Current Students & Alumni**

Higher education marketers recognize that engaged students become engaged alumni. Therefore, it’s important to collect data that shows how current students interact with the institution’s website, social channels, and emails. This data can then be used to optimize communications and participation.

There is always a percentage of engaged alumni who act as brand ambassadors. For the rest of the alumni, higher education marketers need to find unique ways to keep them engaged.

Studies show that colleges and universities are using social media as a strategic tool to interact and engage with alumni. In addition to social media, many colleges and universities have developed alumni-specific websites that leverage alumni-generated content to engage audiences. At the University of Texas, alumni can post photos of themselves making the “horns up” hand sign for the school’s mascot. Princeton University features alumni on a social online weekly blog feature.

While using social media as a marketing tool helps drive engagement, it’s important to use metrics to track which social networks have the most interaction, how many alumni have joined a LinkedIn group, registered for alumni-only websites, participated in online campaigns, or attended events. This data, combined with Net Promoter Score and other metrics, will provide marketers with a helpful snapshot of the health of their outreach as well as actionable information for reaching and engaging alumni.

**Quick Tip**

When it comes to data collection and analysis, there are a number of tools, some of which are low-cost or free, that are useful for tracking campaigns, aggregating data, and providing insights:

- Google Analytics
- Hootsuite
- Tweetreach
- Social Mention
- Sumall (aggregator)
Students, influencers, and alumni recognize the college website as the information hub for an institution, so it’s imperative to keep it fresh and engaging while offering the type of content that visitors expect to find. By implementing a content strategy that incorporates personalized elements that appeal to target audiences, marketers can offer site visitors an exceptional user experience that fosters an emotional connection.

Higher education marketers know the competition for their key audiences’ time and attention is fierce. An effective way to stand out from the crowd and engage audiences is by delivering targeted, personalized experiences.

Consumer brands like Amazon and Netflix have so profoundly changed the way users interact with websites that many consumers now expect a personalized experience when interacting with a brand. Higher education is beginning to recognize this opportunity and has been adding more personalization to their web experience:

- **Virtual Campus Tour.** Tufts University’s campus virtual tour page allows users to design their own tour or take the traditional virtual tour. Goucher College allows visitors to select from areas of interest for a customized virtual tour or search by keyword.

- **Admissions.** Prospective freshman at St. Bonaventure can customize their admissions information page by connecting with Facebook. This is a great way to offer customization and integration with social media.

- **Content Hubs.** Colby College has a separate site, Inside Colby, which allows current students to blog about their experience and share videos and photos. Prospective students understand campus life by accessing the public site.

- **School Pages.** Johns Hopkins School of Arts and Sciences’ academics page allows visitors the option to view all programs, all undergraduate programs, all graduate programs, or search by keyword all from one page.

- **Homepage.** Champlain College’s homepage’s side navigation has a button that brings up two drop down menus, one to identify if the visitor is an undergraduate, graduate, etc., and the second offers programs based on the first answer, allowing students to quickly find the information they need.
Prepare and Present Data

The advantage of a data-driven marketing strategy is in the amount and accessibility of valuable information that provides constant feedback on the progress and results of marketing efforts. Higher education marketers presenting to the President and the Board must be able to sort through and analyze which metrics best highlight successes and areas of opportunity, justify spending, prepare for a budget ask, and ultimately, prove their value.

Identify Goals

While a data-focused strategy offers valuable information on progress and results, it can also offer an overwhelming amount of data. To keep focused, marketers should identify goals at the outset of a campaign by prioritizing the five to ten data points on which to track. Record benchmarks and measurable targets from various data sources that can be revisited throughout the campaign, such as:

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<th>Tool Type:</th>
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<th>Marketing Software</th>
<th>Social Media</th>
<th>Email Marketing</th>
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Analysis & Preparation

Next, marketers need to analyze the data and highlight areas of progress and opportunity, which channels produced the greatest results, and if they met or exceeded their goals.

Data should be reviewed against institutional goals and show the direct impact of marketing on the institution’s financial position as well as any impact on other departments. For example, were there increases in:

- School visits from prospective students
- Applications
- Enrollments
- Alumni donations

Marketers should be prepared to answer questions about spending and areas in which the data would justify a budget increase. They should be prepared to request additional budget and justify not only how it will be spent, but how additional funding will result in incremental financial gain for the institution.

Present

When presenting results to the President and/or the Board of Trustees, the presentation should be simple and focused. Too much information and data can be overwhelming and distract from results. Highlight metrics that show marketing’s impact, such as:

- Cost per lead and marketing’s percentage of that cost
- Conversion rate
- Percentage increase of qualified leads
- Click-through rate
- Percentage of traffic from search
- Student enrollment
- Alumni donations
- Channel reports – which channels are working
While presentations should be simple and focused on the above metrics, higher education marketers should be prepared to answer more detailed questions. Areas of discussion may include:

- Short and long-term marketing strategy
- Year-over-year comparison of metrics
- Industry standards and best practices
- Competitive landscape analysis

Data-driven and targeted approaches should be used for all marketing initiatives to ensure marketing leaders are armed with the information needed to effectively speak about strategy and results.

**Conclusion**

Reliance on data-driven marketing strategies better prepares higher education marketers to meet or exceed institutional goals and prove their value to institutional leaders. By identifying areas of opportunity, outlining a plan, benchmarking metrics, and setting goals against which campaigns can be measured, marketers can drive the long-term success of a college or university.

**KEY TAKEAWAYS**

- Align marketing with departmental and institutional goals
- Develop action plans to help you stay on top of metrics and on track to reach your goals
- Create targeted and personalized content
- Engage students at every stage of the student lifecycle
- Set benchmarks and goals for data
- Deliver a report focused on results
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