



The psychology of student attention

It's time to rethink how you communicate with prospects

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Go where they go

Students live online. Especially on social media. They're constantly moving between Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, blogs, website, forums, reviews, and other media to gather and share information. Peer recommendations matter as much as the information on your website because they're authentic. The sheer volume of information means you have to provide more value to get noticed. Make sure you meet prospects where they are and have something meaningful to offer.

Speak their language

Mass communications used to be the norm. Now, students are used to personalised emails with relevant information. They are ignoring faceless brands and paying attention to individuals with stories to tell. Make sure your communications come from real people talking to, rather than at, your prospects.

In a saturated media landscape, recruiting and enrolment officers are in an unprecedented battle for attention. Winning that battle depends on understanding how today's prospective students think and act—and adjusting your own thinking and actions accordingly

You may have superior programmes, but that only matters if prospective students take notice, take time to learn more, and take opportunities to share your story with others. How do you make this happen?

Stop asking, start giving

It's true that the goal of every communication should be getting your audience to take action. But that action shouldn't always be driven by your needs—for information, application completion, payments. Focus more on the needs of your prospects. Offer something of value, no strings attached. Connect in an authentic way. Build good will. The two-way relationship will pay off.

With dramatic changes to media consumption, students are more in charge than ever. The sooner you embrace that, the sooner you'll reach your goals.

Go where they go

When it comes to comparing products and services, consumers travel far beyond company Web sites. They search online for third party reviews, peer recommendations, news coverage, social media conversations, and other outlets for information that even the biggest brands can't control. In other words, when it comes to your value proposition, prospective students don't have to take your word for it—not when so many others are doing the talking for and about you.

That's why the old marketing approach—**push** out as much information as possible on your brand—won't work anymore. You can't wait for prospects to come to you. The new approach—**pull** audiences in with engaging content, two-way conversations, and genuine value—is the only way to capture and hold attention.

Key strategies

Make social media a core competency

If you haven't already, start by acknowledging that social media is dominating the conversation. Direct mail, billboards, and commercials are overpriced relative to the attention they garner. Nobody is running to the mailbox. Look at any five cars you pass on the road—every passenger is on a phone (if not the driver as well!). Students are holding conversations online and that's where you need to be.

You don't have to jump in with both feet right away. But you do have to jump in. The key is to get comfortable with these new platforms, determine gaps in skills and resources, and create a plan for making social media one of your institution's core competencies. It's not just about

mastering Facebook or Snapchat, but rather being ready to seize opportunity when the next Facebook comes around. The potential return on investment is significant in both the short and long term.

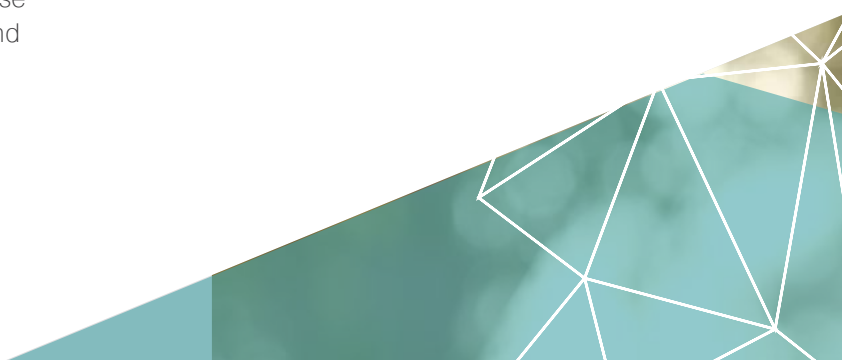
When you're ready to dip your toe in the water, start with something simple. Videos are easier to make than ever and incredibly effective. For example:

- Interview current students about their personal experiences and post the videos on your YouTube channel.
- Demystify the admissions process by following one of your admissions counselors around for a few days and documenting their work. What's catching their attention as they review a few applications? What are they highlighting as they lead a campus tour for prospective students? What's on the agenda for the weekly admissions meeting?
- Ask first year students to snap short video clips of campus life and share them with students who've been admitted but not yet enrolled.
- Push all videos out through Twitter or Facebook and pose questions that encourage viewers to leave comments after watching.
- Don't over-edit. Authenticity is key. As is getting content out quickly and frequently. The more content you generate, the quicker you'll master this competency.

Ultimately, the medium and message will be different at every stage of the recruiting lifecycle. But the goal is the same: engage more prospects with more personal, two-way communications.

Meet user expectations

Your website is still a critical brand platform. Once you've used social media to drive traffic to the site, don't lose prospects in the first five minutes by making it hard to find information or difficult to accomplish activities.



Think about the mobile and desktop sites prospects visit every day to manage other areas of their lives. Most offer self-serve tools so that users can achieve their goals on their own time, at their own pace. Most have intuitive navigation and information organised around the way users actually behave.

Make it easy for students to apply, enrol, and communicate with your institution online. If it's too hard, they'll go elsewhere.

Speak their language

Your prospects spend a significant part of their time online deciding who and what to pay attention to. Amidst the proliferation of personal opinions and stories, corporate-speak falls flatter than ever. It's time to put a face on the name.

Key Strategies

Personalise content

Audiences respond more often and more positively to content that (1) comes from an actual person, with an actual name; and (2) contains a personal greeting and a relevant message. Technology has made this much easier to execute and can eliminate the generic "To Whom it May Concern" or "Dear Current Applicant." Take the time to personalise greetings, create multiple versions of content based on specific audience interests and resist the temptation to send everything to everyone.

Make it authentic

Students get enough transactional communication. To stand out, engage teaching staff, alumni, current students, or other 'personalities' in creating content with a distinct perspective and authentic tone of voice. Authenticity is your best weapon against the common instinct to delete emails before reading or scroll past social media postings without a glance.

Stop talking at prospects and start a conversation

These days, readers of online information and opinions love to hit the share button. Back and forth comments and conversations are a standard part of media consumption.

Take advantage of this new behaviour by ensuring that all of your communications can be shared in multiple ways and contain questions that encourage readers to engage further with your institution or with each other. If you get feedback, make sure to listen and respond. Keep up your half of the conversation at all times.

Accept that you're in the media business

Creating more engaging content and finding a wide range of communications channels requires adding or shifting resources. As institutional leaders realise what's at stake in the battle for attention, they are investing in chief marketing officers, content developers and social media managers. They are directing teaching and administrative staff across campus to participate in online conversations,



connect with prospects directly and contribute their personal stories to enhance the corporate brand.

When the institution-wide call for prospect engagement is being made at the highest executive and board levels, recruiting and enrolment officers can become “digital mayors.”

That job description includes:

- Soliciting and curating content from a wide range of producers
- Pushing content out to multiple platforms
- Monitoring the conversation, responding to tweets, comments, posts, emails and other communications and forwarding them on to the right people when appropriate
- Educating the institution on the importance of these new relationship-building strategies
- Constantly advocating for new ways to offer prospects value
- Sending internal updates demonstrating return on investment

Ideally, these officers should have technology that automates processes and manages the prospect funnel so they can focus more time on mayoral responsibilities.

Stop asking, start giving

Every day, prospects wade through volumes of information online. One of the most common filters they use: **Value.**

For every communication you send asking prospective students to submit information or complete tasks, create another offering something of value, no strings attached. If they see you're just as interested in their needs as your own, they'll feel a greater commitment to moving the relationship forward.

I advise every institution to create a list of 20 “gives” with no “asks.” Start listening to your community. Care the most. Wow and delight! A few examples and best practices:

- Create How-To guides that help students overcome challenges—how to prepare a good application, how to navigate the financial aid process, how to choose the right institution. Send guides via targeted



emails and post in places where students are already talking about these subjects—higher education forums, specialised Facebook communities, etc.

- Invite prospects to events with business leaders who can speak to making higher education decisions that align with professional goals. Post-event, send personalised thank you emails under the speaker's name.
- Create an authentic video (no editing) of alumni describing both good decisions they made with regard to their education and things they wish they had done differently. Post on your YouTube channel and push out through social media.
- Create a virtual forum for prospective students to ask questions of current students.
- Hold regional events for admitted students—attended by teaching administrators, staff, current students and others who can provide personal insights on questions affecting the decision to enrol. Gather top questions and answers into an email and send to admitted students in other regions.
- Connect admitted students to teaching staff aligned with their academic and professional interests. Hold online “office hours” that enable prospects to pose questions to staff who manage campus life, degree planning, or student success.

- Go through self-shared information, such as comments left on a student's Facebook page or recent Tweets. Align communications with their interests. If a prospective student identifies as a senior football player and sports fan, send her your school's football t-shirt. If you find a science fair participant, connect him to the chemistry professor who shares his curiosity. This may seem like a daunting amount of work. So get students to help. Ask administrative staff and teaching staff to spend just one hour a week curating and responding to the incredibly valuable information your prospects share every day.

There will always be the need for standard communications at every stage of the recruiting lifecycle—those related to applications, registration, payments, etc. Consider each an opportunity to include a value-add of some kind. Even if it's just a link to helpful resources or relevant stories. Maintaining this balance is the key to maintaining relationships with the students you care about most.

Technology is changing the game

In the battle for attention—and ultimately for attracting and retaining the best students—technology is indispensable.

Why?

Meet prospect expectations

Personalised content, self-service, access to real time information and two-way communications have become basic costs of entry in the world of recruiting. In most cases, jury-rigging existing technology or manual systems to meet these expectations is not a viable, long-term solution. Institutions need technology purpose-built for relationship management and customer service. The alternative—delivering a poor user experience at a time when user expectations are higher than ever—comes with considerable risk.

Foster collaboration

As additional stakeholders across campus join the relationship-building process, siloed systems will be a major barrier to managing workflow. Sharing valuable prospect data. Integration and a seamless user experience are must-haves if recruiting and enrolment are to become a campus-wide priority.

Improve performance

Many institutions understand the importance of more authentic, frequent, multi-platform communications, but fail in the execution. The biggest mistake is to simply throw darts at the wall and hope something sticks. Unfortunately, hope is not a strategy.

To continuously improve performance, you need data—and not just numbers on the prospect funnel. You need reports and analytics that provide real-time visibility into how well your communication and relationship-building efforts are performing. Especially when you're trying new things with limited resources.

Summary

You can absolutely win the battle for prospective student attention. It will take time and internal education to shift the way your institution thinks about, and invests in, new methods of engagement. Proactive, tailored, two-way communications with prospects are no longer nice-to-haves. They are essential to meeting students where they are and giving them what they need.

Start small. Test different strategies. Be more social. Eventually, begin to scale what works. Make sure to continuously measure and evolve your tactics. When it comes to student behaviour and needs, the only constant is change. If you can remain nimble and responsive, you will build deeper relationships with better-fit students and improve both their success and yours.

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