Admissions Outreach Report and Best Practices & Insights

Establishing and Continuing Communication with Prospective Adult and Professional Degree Students

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In today’s ultra-competitive higher educational landscape, students have more options than ever. Understanding how your competition goes after those students can be a valuable asset. How quickly are competitors reaching out to prospects? What channels are they most often using to engage with prospects? Which fields on Request for Information (RFI) forms are mandatory and which are optional? And what value propositions do competitors think set them apart when initially meeting with a potential student?

Our analysis of admissions outreach started by submitting an online Request For Information (RFI) form to 20 different adult and professional degree programs from well-established schools. To ensure anonymity and impartiality, this was done by posing as a prospective student. All of the schools analyzed have an online option and that online option was the focus of this research. Along with the RFI results, a variety of other information was also researched and compiled. In order to collect the same data from each school, we used the following methodology:

- Collected outreach from the competitive set of institutions
- Audited each school’s RFI and websites
- Tracked the time between initial RFI submission by the prospective student and the first phone outreach from the institution
- Recorded first meetings with schools that initiated phone outreach

Once the data was collected, the results were collated into a comprehensive competitive analysis. Insights and statistics from that analysis create the basis of this report. In the second section of this report, you’ll find our Top Five Best Practices related to outreach to prospective students.
Communication Between School and Prospect

**SPEED-TO-LEAD TIMES**

*How many minutes did it take schools to make the connection from RFI submission to initial phone outreach?*

Five schools called their potential student in **three minutes or less**. From there, speed-to-lead times ranged from 12 minutes to 84 minutes — nearly an hour and a half.

**QUALIFY AND TRANSFER**

*Does your school qualify inquiring students on the phone, then transfer them to the appropriate admission counselor?*

In our competitive analysis, **exactly half of the schools used Q&T** while the other half did not.

**OUTREACH BY CHANNEL**

*Different schools used different means of reaching out to their prospective student.*

**Four of the schools used text messaging.** Seven sent voicemails. Twelve made phone calls. And **seventeen sent emails**.

Several schools used multiple channels for initial outreach.

**TOTAL NUMBER OF OUTREACHES**

*How many times did the schools we contacted reach out to a potential student?*

Outreach ranged from a single contact to **a whopping 47 outreaches**. The average was 15.94.
What's the magic number for sending emails to a potential student who has completed a request for information form on your website? Four schools in our competitive analysis used just one. Two sent two emails and two sent three. Two schools each sent five, six, seven and eight emails. And one school sent a total of 14 emails — by far the highest amount.

How about phone calls? What's the sweet spot for being persistent without overdoing it? Two schools made just one phone call each, with another school making two calls. Three schools made between six and eight calls each. Five schools called the student's number between 16 and 24 times. And one school dialed their potential student a total of 45 times.

The school that called their prospective student 45 times is the same school that sent just one email.

Only seven of the schools we anonymously contacted left voicemails. Five of those schools left one voicemail each. One left two voicemails. And one recorded a total of five voicemails — just one shy of the six phone calls they placed.

The school that left the most voicemails also sent a high number of emails — 25 in all.

When it comes to sending texts to a potential student, one thing is clear: Schools in our competitive analysis use it very sparingly — if at all. Out of the 20 schools we contacted, only four replied via text. And each of those schools replied just once.
SCHOOLS USING WEBSITE CHAT FUNCTION

Nearly 58 percent of the schools we anonymously contacted offer the chat function on their website, popping on-screen to ask the prospective student if they need help or have questions. The other 42 percent don’t have this as an interactive option.

SCHOOLS OFFERING WEBINARS

Schools are always looking for ways to get information about their programs out to prospective students. Of the schools we reviewed, 32 percent offered live webinars specifically for prospective students. (For the purposes of this analysis, if a school only offered a pre-recorded webinar, that was not counted in the results.)
An RFI, or Request For Information, is one way that potential students let a given school know they are interested. Most prospective student RFIs come via a form on the school’s website, with the student completing a form using their phone, tablet or computer. Schools often hand out printed RFIs as well, typically at college fairs and recruiting events. Unlike unsolicited recruitment, when a prospective student completes an RFI, they are leading the conversation by asking for information about the school.

**MOST COMMON RFI FIELDS**

*What information is most important for schools to obtain at the RFI inquiry stage?*

Name and email address ranked highest, with 19 of our comparison schools requiring them. Phone Number, Degree Type and Zip Code were next, required by 17, 14 and 12 schools, respectively. Level of Study (Undergraduate, Graduate, etc) and Area of Interest (such as “Business”) tied with 10. Other RFI fields, in descending order, include Military Service, State, Street Address, Country, City and Term Intent for beginning school.

**IS THERE A PHONE NUMBER REQUEST ON THE RFI?**

*How important is it to get a prospective student’s phone number on the RFI?*

Fifteen of the schools — or 79 percent — required a phone number in order to submit the form. Two schools did not require a phone number and two schools made entering a phone number optional — combining for 21 percent.

**IS THERE A TERM INTENT QUESTION ON THE RFI?**

For planning and marketing purposes, it’s helpful to find out when the prospective student plans to start school — fall of this year, spring of next year or even further down the road. Yet 15 of the schools in our competitive analysis did not list term intent on their RFI. Four schools required a term start selection for submission.

**IS THERE A DEGREE PROGRAM PULL-DOWN LISTING ON THE RFI?**

With schools measuring enrollment numbers to help determine which (if any) programs to add or to cut, listing degree programs on the RFI makes sense. Fourteen schools required a degree program selection on the RFI, while five did not.
A Value Proposition is a feature, service or benefit that makes your school and your programs attractive to potential students. It’s the answer to the question “why should a student select your school over other schools they are considering?” Value propositions can run the gamut from basic positive information to specific details that truly set your school or program apart from the competition.

VALUE PROPOSITIONS

During their first meeting with the prospective student, what did the schools we anonymously contacted use as their value propositions?

THE #1 RESPONSE FROM 11 OF THE SCHOOLS
Flexibility of online courses

SECOND PLACE
High level of support
8 schools

THIRD PLACE
Ability to take classes and do the work on your own schedule and an accelerated schedule
7 schools

FOURTH PLACE
ACBSP/AACSB accreditation and the “high quality” of the program
5 schools

HONORABLE MENTIONS

Four schools each: Having the same faculty and curriculum as campus plus a liberal transfer credit policy. Three schools each: Regional accreditation; business school reputation; never have to come to campus; pre-evaluation for transfer credits; wide array of degrees; highly ranked school and 100+ year old school.

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Best Practices for Establishing and Continuing Communication with Prospective Adult and Professional Students

Best Practice #1
Send Your Message Across Different Channels

When reaching out to prospective students, it’s important to utilize all communication channels at your disposal — from phone calls, emails and printed mailings to social media, landing pages, texting and online chat programs.

If you text, employ 1:1 texting so the potential student knows you’re taking the time to talk to them directly. Bulk and mass texts lead to high opt-out rates and can make students feel as though they’re being spammed — a terrible impression for your school. The use of text messaging, when done right, can help cut through the clutter, make a genuine connection and win that potential student over.

If you offer an online chat function via your website, be sure you’re prepared to offer real-time answers during business hours. When a prospective student clicks the chat icon, they’re looking for a friendly voice to quickly answer their questions.

If an outside provider is placing or returning calls on your behalf to potential students, make sure the phone number the students will see has the area code associated with your school. People today are savvy enough to recognize area codes and no one wants to think they’re getting a call from an impersonal backroom call center in another part of the country.
BEST PRACTICE #2

Set Goals

Enrollment efforts are an ongoing, year-round process. In order to measure and ensure your efforts are successful, continually review data from the previous quarter, recruitment cycle or year-to-date and use that data to establish and update goals and set benchmarks for improvement.

Setting goals can be as straightforward as working to improve the email open rate for a specific segment of your prospective student pool — clearly delineating groups and using targeted content for students who work in certain fields, students who live in certain areas, students who are members of professional associations and so on. Improving click-through rates is another area you can work to improve.

BEST PRACTICE #3

Meet Your Prospective Students Where They’re At

It sounds simple enough: meet your prospective students where they’re at. Be respectful of their time, their space and their wishes. Be aware of how THEY want to communicate. And do what’s best for them, not what’s easiest for the admissions department. This simple mindset change can make a world of difference.

BEST PRACTICE #4

Create a Clear and Meaningful Message that Speaks to Your Audience and Specific School

In today’s age of segmentation, there’s no such thing as a one-size-fits-all recruitment message. Students are more likely to respond and engage when they receive a more personalized communication — one that relates specifically to them and their situation.

Yet while segmenting your audience is valuable, don’t get fragmented to the point where your marketing team is having to create dozens of variations on the same message. Find a balance that works for your school and your audience. And in order to get the best results, make sure you’re seeking and following up with the prospective students who most fit the profile of your school.

BEST PRACTICE #5

Use Your Brand and Your Attributes to Your Advantage

What sets your school apart? What programs or specialty areas are you most known for? All online degree programs are flexible, convenient, accelerated (compared to on-campus degrees) and let you work around your schedule. So what makes yours different? That’s the message your recruitment materials need to convey.

Maybe you’re a leader in a certain field — such as business, education, science, communications or nursing. Maybe yours is a historical story showing longevity and the fact that you’ve been successfully helping students thrive in careers for decades. Even though location doesn’t technically matter when pursuing an online degree, maybe you tout that location, knowing online students often opt for the “close to home” school. Or maybe you speak to the incentives and beyond-the-basics your school can offer — everything from scholarships, free books and credit for work experience in the student’s field of study to special arrangements for military students who may be on active duty. Find your niche and use it to your advantage.
InsideTrack research provides institutional decision-makers and higher education leaders with evidence-based insights on how to measurably increase student success. We investigate the trends, practices and challenges shaping today’s higher education landscape and generate new findings regarding the student experience and student support. Our data, which draws on proprietary analytics, surveys and qualitative assessment, is firmly rooted in our direct experience supporting millions of students and thousands of programs since 2001. With student and institutional outcomes at the heart of every inquiry, InsideTrack research equips educators with the knowledge needed to advance toward, and advocate for, effective and innovative approaches to student support.

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Patrick Boye joined InsideTrack in 2012 and is currently an Operations Client Manager. In this role, he brings his extensive experience working directly with all levels of institutional staff to create comprehensive enrollment and retention strategies, and provide insights and recommendations to improve success, process efficiency and student outcomes. Boye has a passion for social change and the opportunities that higher education fosters. He graduated from the University of Oregon School of Communications and Journalism.

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