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Communication in Student Recruiting

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Abstract

This article examines communication channels and processes for recruiting new students in higher education. It looks at both traditional and non-traditional methods for connecting with prospective students. It then shares best practices from a human-interest perspective, offering suggestions for success, including some not-so-intuitive or well-known practices, as well as new cutting-edge approaches. These best practices are applicable to an institution, a department within an institution, or a specific academic program.

Introduction

Focused recruiting efforts in higher education are important for sustaining both programs and their institutions. This paper outlines specific and known aspects for identifying a market audience, dedicated messaging for this audience, and message effectiveness for recruiting potential students. Following a brief Literature Review, items discussed are Audience Preferences, Methods, and Types; Communication Process; Traditional Recruitment; Non-Traditional Recruitment; and Best Practices.

Literature Review

While there has been much research on recruiting, there are several matters that require distinct attention. The first is whether all possible audiences have been identified (Aslam, 2015; Han, 2014; Haskins & Kirk-Sanchez, 2006), whether the messaging is reaching them (Han, 2014), and if the messages they receive are relevant and informative for decision-making purposes (Aslam, 2015; Campbell, 2017; Cognitive Marketing, 2014). Second, there is an increasing number of social media platforms available, where users regularly engage in almost unlimited forms of virtual communication (Aslam, 2015; Bischoff, Castendyk, Gallagher, Schaumloffel, & Labroo, 2008; Campbell, 2017; Comevo, 2015; EAB, 2017; National Association for College Admission Counseling [NACAC], 2015; Winn, Leach, Erwin, & Benedict, 2014). Third, the number of institutions offering specialized programs, with an assortment of programs being offered, has expanded and continues to do so (Aslam, 2015; Auer, 2010; Han, 2014). Increasing competition alone supports the need to analyze methods for connecting with future students.

Identifying all potential audiences, measuring communication effectiveness, and utilizing the best social media channels all drive the need for regular, thoughtful, and consistent recruitment methods analysis (Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2017). Ongoing examination efforts reinforce and sustain recruiting success, and either alter or eliminate what is not working.

This paper outlines specific and known aspects of audience identification, messaging, and message effectiveness.

Audience Preferences, Methods, and Types

Regularly examining recruiting methods and then making adjustments as necessary ensures a steady stream of new students each semester (Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2017). Analysis questions begin by asking whether candidates were most drawn to traditional or non-traditional messaging, or if a combination of these proved most effective as they sought higher education information. Further, did these seekers prefer a face-to-face approach or a completely virtual connection (Aslam, 2015)?

Another point for audience analysis asks whether individual student markets preferred one communication method over another (Campbell, 2017; Han, 2014). Student market categories can be broken down into traditional, first-generation, racially diverse, low-income (EAB, 2017; Grapin, Lee & Jaafar, 2015; Haskins & Kirk-Sanchez, 2006), and millennial prospects (Comevo, 2015). Adults and non-traditional students make up another marketing segment that can likewise include first-generation, racially diverse, and low-income individuals (Grapin et al., 2015; Haskins & Kirk-Sanchez, 2006; Higher Education Marketing, 2017; Smith, 2017). A final group to consider is the international student population, either living in their home country or already residing in the United States (Aghaz, Hashemi & Atashgah, 2015; McFadden, Maahs-Fleming & Mallett, 2012; NACAC, 2015).

Beyond the obvious student prospects, parents make up a large and highly influential group of decision-makers (Higher Education Marketing, 2017). Parents are instrumental in determining where a son or daughter attends college and may be the most decisive factor in final decision-making (Aslam, 2015; Little & Price, 2013). Beyond family members, school counselors also impact decision-making by providing easy access to available college information, or by sponsoring college fairs at their schools (NACAC, 2015).

Local companies and industry-specific organizations are another significant group of recruiting partners (Comevo, 2015; Higher Education Marketing, 2017). Local employers may connect directly with high school counselors, providing information on the future of their goods or services, as well as desired employee skills. Employers may then link up with colleges that offer curriculum- and industry-specific programs supporting production of their goods or executing their services. Partnering academic institutions can then educate students for future employment, while also offering direct and ongoing student connections with an employer throughout the entire college experience.

Communication Process

Per Campbell (2017), recruiting is only the first point of contact within the larger and complete cycle of college communication processes. Typically, admissions offices are responsible for student recruitment activities. Most importantly, this first point of contact is where students begin their journey toward graduation, so any initial contact can strongly influence retention and completion of educational goals (Aghaz et al., 2015; Campbell, 2017; Haskins & Kirk-Sanchez, 2006; Little & Price, 2013; Rudd, Budziszewski & Litzinger, 2014).

It is important to remember that the entire communication cycle, also referred to as a funnel of communication, is deep and progresses slowly (Campbell, 2017). The messaging path moves from recruiting to prospect inquiries, then onto student application for acceptance. Another phase of communication begins once a student is admitted, confirmed, and enrolled in classes. Effective staff-to-student connection is an ongoing process, beginning with recruiting and continuing through graduation. However, recruiting effectiveness sets the tone for future retention and eventual graduation (Bischoff et al., 2008; Little & Price, 2013; Rudd et al., 2014).

The best resources and channels for recruiting messaging are the next consideration. Social media options will be detailed later, but for now, it is important understand that although there is a full palette of possible communication methods not all possibilities are equal (Cognitive Marketing, 2014). Some messaging portals may prove to be less effective in reaching target audiences (Campbell, 2017). Even then, after determining which channels to utilize, the effectiveness of some may change over time. This further substantiates the need for regular recruiting methods analysis.

The recruitment communication process must be strategically and creatively designed (Aghaz et al., 2015; Higher Education Marketing, 2017). This is especially true since any initial recruiting interaction may be correlated to student success and retention. Aslam (2015) suggests 43 creative ways of disseminating recruitment messages, especially to ensure that messaging content never gets old. Unique and creative recruiting, as suggested by Aslam, includes interactive video gaming that promotes virtual campus tours, 'future' stories to show students how they will use their degree, cell phone text marketing, and personalized websites relative to a student's degree interest. Again, recruiting connections begin to set up a communication system that continues through graduation and beyond.

The latest report from marketing strategist Ruffalo Noel Levitz (2017) provides up-to-date research on the top five ways to reach prospective students. Each set of the top five includes both traditional and non-traditional methods of communicating, although there is some variance between private and public institutions. For private institutions, the best points of contact are an optimized website, text messaging, email communication, general publications, and cell phone calls. For public institutions, the top five channels are email communication, optimized website, video calls using Skype or other services, text messaging, and general publications.

Traditional Recruitment

Traditional recruiting methods are those which have been utilized for decades by admissions departments (Aslam, 2015; Comevo, 2015; Higher Education Marketing, 2017; Little & Price, 2013; NACAC, 2015). Traditional recruiting events may take place on campus, within a high school setting, in community centers, or on locations sponsored by potential employers or other partners. Open houses commonly take place on campus, but there are other settings where people can come and go while seeking higher education information. Overnight, day, or weekend on-campus visits create visitor awareness of the atmosphere surrounding student learning and activities and begin building community with potential students (Bischoff et al., 2008).

Before the internet and social media, admissions personnel had to reach out to students through any avenues available at that time. Interestingly, the recruiting practice of one-on-one connection has withstood the test of time and is still considered highly effective in recruiting (Comevo, 2015). As well, personal and personalized communication begins to build an interactive bridge between staff and students. It is important to note that a network of this type is difficult to construct through social media (Aslam, 2015; Campbell, 2017).

Non-Traditional Recruitment

Electronic forms of communication define contemporary and non-traditional opportunities to connect with information-seeking audiences. The most commonly-used path is an institution's website (Aslam, 2015; Campbell, 2017; Comevo, 2015; Higher Education Marketing, 2017). The website acts as a home base, where users can easily navigate from one institutional social media platform to another. Some of the most commonly used social media sites include Facebook, Twitter, Google+ Hangouts, Skype (Aslam, 2015), Snapchat, Instagram, Messenger Day, and WhatsApp (Higher Education Marketing, 2017).

There are other electronic tools available for reaching out to future students. Student-led blogs deliver a recruiting message designed from the perspective of either current students

or alumni (Aslam, 2015; Han, 2014). Virtual meetings, virtual college fairs, and informational podcasts connect staff with potential students (Aslam, 2015; Campbell, 2017; Cognitive Marketing, 2014; NACAC, 2015). Two other opportunities for connecting with targeted audience segments are chat sessions and cell phone texting (Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2017).

A regular examination of recruiting methods in a higher education institution, department, or program-of-study can ensure a steady stream of students. Analyzing current practices provides the means for retaining successful methods, while eliminating other methods that are not working. In the same manner, there are various channels of message distribution, where some may be more effective than others. The key to establishing an operational recruiting system calls for regular analysis, then making adjustments where necessary.

Best Practices

Recruiting practices must be tailored by specific organizations for specific potential students being sought, while remembering that recruiting communication can be correlated to retention and goal completion (Aghaz et al., 2015; Little & Price, 2013; Rudd et al., 2014). Therefore, it is necessary to go beyond protocol and procedures when communicating with prospective students.

A primary quality reaching beyond prescribed protocol looks at recruiting practices through a human-perspective lens. This is where traditional recruiting methods might provide the most personable interactions. Traditional activities are face-to-face, where direct eye contact is made, and where staff and faculty speak directly to potential students and sometimes their parents. On-campus events promote a glimpse into the institution's culture, learning atmosphere, and social presence.

Educational Barriers present another key set of concerns relative to the human perspective in recruiting (Grapin et al., 2015; Winn et al., 2014). International students especially face challenges other students may not face, or for homeland students, are challenging at a different level of complexity (Grapin et al., 2015; McFadden et al., 2012).

International students are far from home (Grapin et al., 2015). They have no family nearby, making social connections all the more vital. These students may have been discouraged to even apply for educational opportunities in the United States. Various linguistics are used on campus. It may be difficult to connect with faculty and staff, as well as other students. They may face heightened degrees of disparity and prejudice. Educational materials lack representation of their culture and its characteristics. Particularly for the international student, the key to retention is to recruit and then support their efforts.

Regardless of a student's homeland, there are universal concerns of which recruiting teams need to be cognizant. Students, and their parents, look at the size of the university, its location, program rigor, and social potential (McFadden et al., 2012; Winn et al., 2014). Organizational image is important, and how the institution is seen by outsiders (Aghaz et al., 2015).

Maintaining a good image and reputation (Aghaz et al., 2015) enhances student loyalty and thereby retention. When the recruiting message is positive, competent, capable, and helpful, the best students are attracted to the institution. Image and trust go together. Perhaps most of all, students want to envision the future payoff after graduation.

On-campus visits warrant the best interactions that address best practices so far. However, there are situations where student or parent cannot visit the campus in person, particularly at the information-gathering stage. This increases the need for exemplary digital communication. When planning the online presence, it is essential to have a creative strategy, determine who says what on which channel, to whom, and with what potential effect (Auer, 2010).

Comevo (2015) equates the digital presence as a best marketing practices. Further, there needs to be a specific and consistent image throughout all digital media (Cognitive Marketing, 2014). In the current age, digital media also must be seen across various devices, especially mobile devices (Winn et al., 2014). Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is another vital consideration, but the practice and benefits are beyond the scope of this paper (Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2015).

Recruiting (and retention) is a shared responsibility (Campbell, 2017). Admissions offices may be the initial gatekeepers, but for ongoing student success, everyone in the institution has a role to play. These roles exist within outreach and bridge programs, orientation and student life classes, and social activities, as well as in the classroom. Little and Price (2013) suggest using student ambassador groups to work directly with the college library, promoting institutional presence to prospective students.

Other factors that influence college choice include coursework delivery, tuition costs, convenience of attending, campus appearance, career opportunities, and family, friend or peer recommendation (Winn et al., 2014). Additionally, types of degrees offered are a major concern (McFadden et al., 2012).

Adult and non-traditional students are not drawn to in-class imagery in electronic media messages (Smith, 2017). They prefer seeing themselves after they have graduated, so want to envision the future payoff in attending an institution. For all potential students, emotion should be recognized and addressed, and how it affects final decision-making.

Cognitive Marketing (2014) suggests that institutions are not required to be everywhere digitally. Pick the best platforms, use visuals creatively, post in real time, and regularly update online media. Higher Education Marketing (2017) encourages the use of student blogs. The blogs can showcase faculty and staff, promote events, and highlight local community attractions. Student blogs are written from the student's perspective. This supports the notion that a potential student is not just a number (Han, 2014). Students and their parents are human, warranting as much personal and personable contact as possible, either electronically or face-to-face.

Conclusion

This article strived to be a reminder of the importance in successful recruiting practices. It may inspire change where necessary in recruiting methods, either in altering certain components or eliminating others altogether. Recruiting communication can enhance the future success of incoming students. Connecting effectively with students is an ongoing and long-term process that requires attention, persistence, and consistency.

There is no set formula outlining the perfect recruiting method. Suggestions shared can work for an institution, a department in the institution, or for a specific program of study. The key is to ask students what elements drove their decision to attend a particular university, then continue those practices providing the best results. It is not only important to have a steady stream of new students each semester, but also their future success, in college and career.

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