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An Occasional Paper

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Top Ten Ways Your Web Site can Become the Ultimate Yield Tool

It's that time of year again. Admissions staffs all over the country are waiting with bated breath to see if accepted students will commit and enroll. You've worked hard, focused your communications and outreach, and spent countless hours reviewing applications and wooing students. Now comes the hard part...and in a down economy, it's that much harder. Currently, admissions offices are facing competing demands to make their class while meeting the financial needs of students from distressed families—and right now, just about everyone is distressed.

At a moment like this, your Web site is one of your best yield tools. In a world in which all media is quickly becoming digital and prospective student audiences are spending more and more time on the Web, your site can help sway them in your favor. How? Start with the idea that your site should be much more than a temporary destination. Earlier in the funnel, it served to entice and inform prospective students, to make your case and persuade them to apply. Your Web site—whether institutional or admissions-specific—worked in concert with your collateral and traditional media to raise awareness through standard, but often one-dimensional tactics: creative copy driven by key messages, profiles of students and faculty, and strategic displays of key competitive information.

Now, the awareness phase is over and students are moving from recruiting to fulfillment. You need to build a sustained relationship with students, the kind that motivates them to join your campus community. The best tool for doing that is your Web site. Your site can offer students a much deeper level of engagement than they have previously experienced. Keep in mind that many are coming to your site from social platforms like Facebook which enable rich levels of interaction from bonding with friends of like interest to creating and sharing a wide range of content. The odds are good they'll be looking for a similar level of engagement on your site. And, at this point in the funnel, their expectations will be much higher than when they were just getting to know you.

So how do you transform your site into an effective yield tool? Now you have to make good on your promises. You also have to continue to prove—and make an even stronger case for—how and why you are a better choice than your competitors. The following steps should start you in the right direction:

1. MAKE THEIR ONLINE LIVES EASIER—although it's the least glamorous part of Web design, usability is probably the most important. If accepted students can't easily find what they need, they might begin to doubt that you care about them as much as you say you do. Poor usability leads to a poor brand experience, a disconnect between what you say and what you do. Take the time to evaluate your site with a good analytics tool to understand traffic patterns and general usage. Usability tests would also help uncover navigation problems. Then take a look at overall quality. Broken or weak links, confusing labeling, slow-loading pages, security issues—all can lead to a poor user experience. If you can't take care of accepted students online, they'll think you probably can't take care of them offline.

2. GIVE THEM RELEVANT CONTENT—what do students at this point in the funnel need to hear? What concerns can be immediately addressed? Content specifically focused on this group will go a long way to convincing them you can help them meet their needs. Institutions sometimes use this opportunity to reiterate core messages, but this risks alienating your audience. You've already told them who you are several times by now. Now you need to take it several steps deeper. What should they be doing next and where on your site do you tell them? These students need access to better, richer, and more detailed information about the things you've been telling them all along, especially about financial aid, key benefits of your academic programs, and outcomes. Above all, they need to feel that this content has been personalized directly for them, taking into account the specifics of their identity and situation. With that in mind, there are other accepted student issues worth addressing, such as:

- Providing a more in-depth view of day-to-day life on your campus
- Showing them how to forge personal connections and build friendships by connecting them to people in your community
- Bringing them closer to their potential professors, especially if they've already stated a program preference
- Giving them a detailed, inside look at the classroom experience, the lab experience, the internship experience, the athletics experience, etc.

- Pointing out the many things there are to do on your campus that weren't listed in the viewbook—this is an opportunity to show off distinctive parts of campus culture and values
- Show them where everything is—campus facilities, etc.—and give them the tools to find things on their own
- Tell them more about your town or city and connect them to its unique opportunities

3. HELP THEM ACHIEVE KEY TASKS—accepted students are looking for ways to take care of practical business, like making online deposits while on your site. Can they currently do this? If not, it's time to implement e-commerce type functionality that will get them closer to making a commitment online. Connect them to your bookstore and other key campus facilities. Let them see their residence hall rooms and perhaps decorate one online. By enabling students to make decisions on-site, you improve the odds of them ending their search and staying with your institution.

4. GIVE THEM A PLACE TO GO THAT IS ALL THEIRS—this is a great way to help accepted students build their own community and become part of yours before they officially come to campus in the fall. Defined online communities have been successful in helping students see how their chosen institutions are the right fit. This can be done by either building a portal or password-protected community within your site, developing your own social network, or creating one on Facebook or another appropriate social platform. The advantages of the first option are obvious: a portal community gives you institutional control over content and is more secure. The downside to this approach is that it requires intensive development and management resources, and because these types of communities are usually nested behind intranets, they are harder to promote. For example, any content community members produce could be walled off from Google and other search engines. Social media options are becoming popular due to their low cost and potential for rapid growth. Numerous institutions have had some success by creating class or yield pages on Facebook—Rachel Reuben of SUNY New Paltz has created an excellent example, along with Azusa Pacific University, West Virginia University, and The Ohio State University. As far as building your own network, there are several low cost options like Ning for doing so, as well as working with a developer to create unique programming which might cost more, but will give you much more control over your brand and content. No matter which approach you take, keep in mind that any community will require disciplined management to nurture and maintain growth. In a time of diminishing resources, this may be challenge. You'll also have to make your online community interesting and useful enough for accepted students to join. To do so, this community should provide a social environment in which students can easily personalize content and your services, enabling them to connect with other accepted students, current students, faculty, orientation staff, etc. Finally, tactics like micro-sites and digital viewbooks which typically show up earlier in the funnel will only be effective if they are capable of building similar communities.

5. GIVE THEM CONTENT IN A VARIETY OF FORMATS—your online community should enable students to have their own profiles and create and share content through a number of available tools, from text to video. They should be able to easily set up a profile, upload photos, search for other accepted students, take part in discussions, and comment on blogs. They should be able to easily share this content with others in the community and—if you've built your own social network—beyond it through tagging and RSS feeds. Content should be portable. Widgets and podcasts, for example, provide accepted students opportunities to take content with them, post it on their own Facebook pages, and review it at their leisure. Whatever you decide, it's important to find opportunities for

them to interact directly with your content—this is the number one way they will forge relationships with your community and make it easier for them to commit. This approach can work throughout your site.

6. REFOCUS EXISTING CONTENT—given the number of places accepted students might visit on your site, you should find opportunities for them to participate on other parts of the site. For example, video profiles of students and faculty can work well on an admissions micro-site, but how about including comment features that enable accepted students to talk to them? Blogs are too often limited to showcasing great students in the recruiting phase—now you can expand them to include faculty advisors, financial aid, and orientation staff, and other key players.

7. TRACK WHERE ACCEPTED STUDENTS GO—you can track clickstream data and where users drop off, the number of hits per page, and whether your content is being actively shared with others (RSS feed usage, tags, etc.) through your analytics and other tracking programs. This data tells you something about accepted students' behavior on your site, and as such, it's invaluable in helping you align your Web strategy with their needs. You can even measure the length of time accepted students watch videos. There are number of criteria for measuring your social media's effectiveness as well, such as tracking volume of comments, conversation topics, and Web mentions elsewhere. Either way, it's important to keep track of this information and act on it. You can modify your videos, add RSS feed options, add ability to tag items, move around the order of the information so users digest it faster, etc.

8. INTEGRATE ACCEPTED STUDENT COMMUNITIES WITH YOUR CRM—integrating any private social network with your current customer relationship management tool will make tracking and managing accepted student behavior that much easier. It will also integrate this data in your general information flow for recruiting, improve your ability to respond and overall efficiency, and make it easier to deliver genuine and timely personalized responses.

9. CONNECT ACCEPTED STUDENTS TO YOUR BEST EVANGELISTS—in any recruiting funnel, your best evangelists tend to be your most recently satisfied customers. In this case, that means recently enrolled students and happy first-years. Recently graduated alums can also help. Any online community you build should always include these folks as inspiration and conversation starters.

10. LET THEM TELL YOU WHAT TO DO—the best online communities exemplify a true democracy. They grow from the combined efforts of individual members and collective cooperation. By treating community members as advisors and taking their input seriously, you'll reassure accepted students that their voices will always be heard on your campus. Whether you build a special community or simply realign your current site to better serve them, students themselves will always be your best resource.

Every college recruiter would love to increase yield and lower recruiting costs. No matter what you decide, you need to show accepted students that you can respond quickly and well to their specific needs. It was for this kind of efficiency that Web sites were created in the first place. Capable of enabling real-time responses, the Web can help you deliver the kind of individualized customer service that will have a significant impact on your yield.

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Stamats, Inc. is the nation's leading provider of integrated marketing solutions for higher education institutions.