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An Occasional Paper

Identifying and Cultivating Secondary Target Audiences

In a previous Occasional Paper, *Developing a Secondary Recruiting Market*, the authors explored a three-step process to help colleges and universities identify and develop new recruitment markets. This paper examines two complementary steps: building the prospect pool and creating an efficient, effective student-search strategy.

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Colleges and universities are largely creatures of habit. Witness, for example, how many colleges and universities still use traditional approaches (media and channels) to recruit students in spite of a constant barrage of strategic innovation and trendy tactics. When it comes to building a prospect pool and soliciting it for inquiries, most recruiters rely on what they *believe* to be tried-and-true solutions. And they trust that larger numbers of prospective students at the top of the recruitment funnel will naturally deposit more enrolled students at the bottom.

When pressed to justify repeated investments in those same strategies and tactics, however, many enrollment managers admit they don't track prospect-to-inquiry-to-applicant-to-matriculant conversions as carefully as they should. Further, they confess that many of the students in their databases are largely unqualified.

Common sense suggests that an unqualified prospect is a liability to a recruitment marketing budget until he or she begins paying tuition.

For the sake of clarification, let's define two key terms:

Prospect: A student who has **not** yet made an overture to an institution. When a college buys a list from College Board, ACT, NRCCUA, or another source, they are buying prospects. It is this prospect pool that is typically "searched." Most inquiring, applying, admitted, depositing, and matriculating students emerge from the prospect pool. Keep in mind, too, that many prospects may never inquire.

Inquirer: There are two types of inquirers: 1) students who respond to search or another institutional initiative, and 2) students who inquired without being contacted by the school, such as a student who discovers the school on the Web. We use the term “inquiry pool” to describe this cohort.

STEP FOUR: BUILD THE PROSPECT POOL

After identifying the kind(s) of students you want and pinpointing where they live, your attention turns to ramping up your school’s brand awareness and building support structures (see our previous Occasional Paper for details). Only after this framework is in place should you consider launching a program to build a prospect pool. In other words, attempting to build a prospect pool in any market where your school has limited or nonexistent brand awareness, and where few if any support structures are in place, is a likely failure and a misuse of precious recruitment marketing resources.

So for the sake of this discussion, let’s assume you spent the last year or so creating or elevating the brand awareness of your school in the new market, and rallying your support networks.

To build a prospect pool we know that most colleges and universities default to purchasing compiled lists of high school students from purveyors like ACT, College Board, NRCCUA, CBSS, and others. And while this strategy largely worked in the past, recent shifts in market perceptions and expectations suggest there are more logical options today.

In Stamats’ 2008 *Teens TALK*[®] study, high school students across the nation told us they rely primarily on their parents and other relatives, high school counselors and teachers, and friends to guide their college choices. Nine out of 10 high school students identified the campus visit as the most helpful source of information about a particular college or university. In other words, prospects look primarily to people they know, along with their own critical observation skills, to sort through their college options.

The days of effectively pushing college information into a prospective student’s view are waning. Today, the college information *seeker* is largely managing the recruitment marketing process, rather than the college information *sender*. Enlightened recruitment practitioners recognize they must first tap **trusted**

resources to build their prospect pools before turning to traditional student-search list providers and methods which are viewed with no small amount of suspicion by those on the receiving end.

Strategically, this suggests a three-tiered prospect pool-building strategy:

1. Seek to generate as many prospects as possible from sources that have historically matriculated at higher rates. This may require you to track inquiry source conversions with greater detail and attention than ever before, but exercising this kind of discipline simply isn’t optional anymore; it is essential. Also necessary will be the need to brainstorm creative strategies and tactics to generate more prospect names from high-matriculating sources. Enlist the most innovative brains on your campus to help, and don’t let limited resources stymie the conversation. The most creative solutions are those that don’t rely on budgets to be successful.
2. **At least twice each year**, solicit prospective student referrals from your enrolled students, employees, alumni, parents of current students, parents of alumni, and others whose names appear in campus databases. We recommend a mid-fall and late-spring timetable, and encourage you to make this as significant a campaign as your annual fund. Invest in appropriate promotional materials and technology. Build an emotionally compelling case for support and make responding to your solicitations easy. Attach the referrers’ names to their referrals in your databases and execute a program of periodic communication that puts one in touch with the other throughout the recruitment cycle. And to build momentum for the annual initiative, celebrate (publicly reward) referrers whose efforts are particularly successful.
3. As you monitor prospect pool development over time and plot predicted conversion metrics based on recent history, you may find that some markets are generating fewer referrals than you need. This is when we recommend you turn to traditional student-search list providers to selectively bolster the pool. But remember to limit the net you cast; “searching” in a market where your school has limited brand awareness is seldom a high-return investment.

STEP FIVE: SEARCH

Once your prospect pool has taken shape and the traditional student-search machinery is gearing up for the annual barrage, it is important for you to embrace leading-edge direct marketing wisdom in all of your planning and executions. Here's a short list of essential knowledge as applied to student-search:

1. Your student-search will only be as productive as the strength of your school's brand in the mind of each prospect *before* the search process begins. Rare is the student who is actually *introduced* to a viable college option through student-search.
2. A multi-channel student-search effort is always more productive than a single-channel version. Integrate postal mail, e-mail, Web, and telephone appeals with pre-search promotions and post-search follow-up to maximize the return on your student-search investment.
3. All consumers, including prospective students and their parents, expect customized, personalized correspondence and pre-populated response mechanisms. "Dear Student" messages and blank reply forms are simply unacceptable.
4. Address recipients' needs rather than your own, and segment the messages in your student-search to connect more effectively with tightly defined cohorts within your larger prospect pool. If you promote elements of your brand experience that are irrelevant to the reader, she'll quit reading after a sentence or two.
5. If your message looks and reads like your competitors' messages, you're only contributing to the blur in the recipient's head. Be bold, if not audacious. Highlight that which makes your school truly distinctive among your competitor set. Be honest and authentic. If you are not clear about what makes you distinctive, then prospective students won't be clear about what makes you distinctive. And remember that skimping on photography or design sends a very strong message about the quality of your institution.
6. Proof, proof again, and then re-proof. Good impressions are fleeting, but errors tend to last a lifetime.
7. Test everything: concepts, copy, graphics, channels, response mechanisms, technology, and everything else before you push the "go" button. And test with appropriate audiences. Student-search programs that make presidents and deans beam with prideful satisfaction seldom hit homeruns among prospective students who are decades younger.
8. The K.I.S.S. principle applies, unless you know your prospect pool is stocked with extraordinarily heady readers, deep thinkers, or those with lots of extra time on their hands and nothing better to do than read tomes of college propaganda.
9. Track, track, track. The better the student-search data you collect this year, the wiser student-search decisions you'll make next year (but only if you make time to analyze that data and follow up with respondents aggressively).
10. Primacy trumps recency. Prospects received hundreds if not thousands of pieces of electronic and postal mail during a single recruitment cycle. Stay abreast of list providers' release dates, and do all that you can to make sure your student-search is among the first received and among the most memorable.
11. Finally, student-search is all about making an offer, not about selling your school. In your search message, offer to give something of perceived value to recipients if they opt in to your inquiry pool. And make sure your offer is aligned with your institutional brand. If your student-search message reads like a sound byte version of your viewbook, you're on the wrong track. [If this talk of an "offer" is new to you, drop me a note and I'll happily elaborate: eric.sickler@stamats.com.]

One final bit of sound advice: Be sure your school "owns your backyard" before investing heavily in developing new recruitment markets. It is exponentially more expensive to recruit students from a distance. Stamats' annual *Teens TALK*[®] research confirms that a majority of undergraduate students attend a college or university within four hours of their homes, so don't overlook low-hanging fruit in your primary market. Calculate and analyze how your local and regional market share is tracking from year to year, and fully leverage the strength of your established brand equity to ensure the greatest return on your recruitment marketing investments.

ABOUT STAMATS, INC.

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

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