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Five Principles of a Successful Prospective Student Direct Marketing Campaign

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If you've been involved in campus marketing for any length of time, you have witnessed an incredible change in the nature of direct marketing to students. In the past, a college could mail a brochure to a high school junior and wait for the student to respond. The college was able to control when they wanted responses and push the student to the next phase of the admission cycle.

Today, prospective students can gather information about colleges and universities from so many sources that they do not need to rely on printed pieces from prospective colleges. In fact, many do not even let an institution know they are researching that college until they apply. In the 2012 e-recruitment practices study by Noel-Levitz, both four-year public and private campuses said 30 percent of applicants first made contact when they applied.[1] Mobile technology is further changing the recruitment communications paradigm. According to the 2013 E-Expectations study, 74 percent of college-bound high school students said they have browsed college sites on a mobile device, with 47 percent saying they also check e-mail on their mobile devices every day.[2] Meanwhile, developing electronic messages that are deliverable has become more difficult as ever-changing spam filters can snag even the most carefully crafted recruitment e-mails.

Does this mean that college direct marketing is a losing proposition or a dying art? Not at all. Developing, executing, and analyzing your prospective student direct marketing campaign can be very challenging, but it is still a strong, productive component of student recruitment—as long as you adapt to the new realities of campus direct marketing.

These five strategies can help you build direct marketing campaigns that reach the students you want to reach, engage them, and start them on the path toward enrollment.

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1. Create a strong prospective student list

Many marketers have heard about the 40/40/20 rule for direct marketing (attributed to direct marketing guru Ed Mayer): 40 percent of the success of a direct marketing campaign depends on using the right list, 40 percent on the offer, and 20 percent on creative execution. [3] The right list is paramount in the success of a direct marketing campaign. That is especially true in the increasingly competitive world of higher education and enrollment management.

But what does it mean to build the "right" list? It's about building a list with names of students who are likely to enroll. Inflating your prospective student pool with names of students who are not inclined to enroll may help you sleep better, but ultimately it could add additional work for your staff and additional costs to your budget. What you want is a mutual fit: a student who matches your desired profile and a student who is interested in what you have to offer.

Building a list that matches your enrollment goals

First, your list strategy needs to align with your overall enrollment strategy. For example, are you planning to maintain enrollment but increase the academic profile? Grow enrollment overall? Increase specific student populations? Expand your geographic reach? You have to know where you want to take your enrollment in the coming years before you can build a list.

You also need to analyze previous list purchases so that you are focusing your resources on the right geographic areas. Conduct specific reviews by county, Enrollment Planning Service, College Board, and Sectional Center Facility (post office) codes.

In most cases, your primary market will represent the dominant part of your list buy, as these students will be more likely to respond and enroll at the highest rates. (Most students attend a college within a four-hour radius of their homes.) The choice of secondary markets should be based on a thorough analysis of your enrollment trends in those markets, not simply on intuition. For many institutions, demographic shifts, increased competition, or other factors have driven the need to look for new markets. Direct marketing can help develop a new market. It is most

effective when used in a market you have already made an investment in—for example, a market where you are sending admissions representatives to conduct high school visits and attend college fairs, or a market where you have a strong alumni base. Expect your direct marketing campaign yield to perform at a lower rate in these markets. Note that it generally takes three to five years to fully develop a new market.

Purchasing lists from multiple vendors is essential to direct marketing success. We know that a single vendor does not have 100 percent of student names in any region and that some vendors are stronger than others for certain institutions. You can take different approaches with different vendors when making your purchases. For example, the College Board and ACT allow you to purchase by test score ranges and academic information, while NRCCUA offers a variety of student-specific information that might be important to your institution (such as religious affiliation, extracurricular activities, etc.). Finding a balance in this list selection process is a key to your success.

Locating students who are likely to enroll: revolutionizing your lists with predictive modeling

Because we believe you should focus on students who are the most likely to enroll, we recommend using a predictive model to create a statistical profile of the type of student who enrolls at your institution. This profile can be used to help with list purchases or to segment your direct marketing campaign.

This strategy allows you to segment your student list by score. For instance, with the predictive modeling Noel-Levitz offers, students receive a score from 0.00 (highly unlikely to enroll) to 1.00 (highly likely to enroll). At a glance, you can segment your lists and find students who are the best enrollment prospects. You may still communicate with students on your lists who have lower scores, but you can focus your most intensive and expensive efforts on higher scoring students. In fact, among the campuses we worked with, *97 percent of their enrolled students came from those scoring 0.60 or higher on the predictive model.*

It's very important to make sure you use a predictive model that is specifically built to your institution and that looks beyond simple factors such as geography. A reliable predictive model will

include individual student information (such as major or household income), source codes, and other variables that truly predict enrollment. It can also help you gain a solid foothold in new markets over time.

If using a predictive model is not a possibility, conduct your own internal analysis of basic geography, majors, and performance by list source and class level to help guide your list purchase.

Investing in list management can pay major enrollment dividends

List building and management can be a complex, data-intensive process, but in today's shifting enrollment environment, it means the difference between success and failure in college direct marketing. You simply will not get the results you want from your direct marketing without giving list management the attention, priority, and analysis it deserves.

The list will determine who you target, but when is the best time to reach out to students? That brings us to the second principle.

2. Communicate with prospective college students at the most strategic time

Many campuses treat the student search as an event, rather than an ongoing process. They send out **one** search mailing a year, often taking the admissions travel brochure, reformatting it as a self-mailer, and sending it out during the fall semester to whatever mailing list is handy.

That may have worked when colleges drove the enrollment process, but today, students drive that process. The advent of "secret shopping," with students looking at your institution but not self-identifying or making contact before applying, has made search an ongoing process.

This shift has also changed when campuses should communicate with students. Colleges should be communicating with students throughout the year and initiating those communications earlier in high school.

Conduct campaigns during fall, late winter, and late spring

The demands of today's students mean that you can't limit your direct marketing efforts to a single event or even a single season. You must campaign throughout the year. I recommend conducting

three campaigns a year—fall, late winter, and late spring. This ensures that you'll be in touch with prospects year 'round.

Note that *campaigns* does not mean just sending out a mailing or a blast e-mail three times a year. Sending a single communication, or even just two or three, and expecting to make an impact is not realistic with today's students. Successful campaigns use multiple contacts through multiple mediums—mail, e-mail, your Web site, social media—to reach prospective students. You want to target students with multiple messages because you're almost certainly competing with many other campuses for their attention. This also leads to my next recommendation.

Connect with "fresh" student prospects

A second component of timing is executing when a list is "fresh." What happens when you mail a list that isn't fresh? You are contacting students who already may have heard from 15 or 20 institutions. Think of receiving your 20th credit card solicitation in the mail and your likely response to it.

Your search lists need to be refined and adjusted throughout the recruitment cycle. Take advantage of new names as soon as they are released by list sources such as College Board, ACT, and NRCCUA so that you can connect with those students before they are inundated with other communications.

Expand your recruitment timeframe from sophomore to senior year

If you're serious about building a robust inquiry pool, your prospecting efforts should begin with high school sophomores and continue through at least early fall of the senior year. Starting in the sophomore year allows you to avoid college-search overload with your prospective students. You can start building relationships with those students before they hit the "recruitment rush hour" of their junior year.

These three strategies will help you maximize your opportunity to reach prospects at key recruitment junctures when your communications will have the greatest impact. In addition, as you move forward in the search cycle, keep refining your list and communicating with your prospects—new and old. Don't be hesitant to add names and communication flows late in a cycle for a high school cohort. I have seen campuses

have dramatic results with well-timed application pushes to seniors.

Once you have your list and timing decided, you have to decide what to communicate to your targets. There may be a temptation to jump into the creative—the messaging, the look and feel—but first, you need to decide on the most crucial element of your communication: the offer.

3. Develop a compelling offer that generates response

The easiest thing to offer to students in a direct marketing campaign is "more information" about your institution. The theory: They request the additional information, enter your inquiry pool, and continue their journey through the enrollment funnel.

There's one large problem with this approach: "More information" is not an attractive offer.

Information about your campus certainly is valuable to students, but the offer of that information has to be presented in a way that conveys value to students. The direct marketing consultant Alan Rosenspan explains it well when he says the two most important parts of an offer are the *perceived value* by the target and the *presentation* of the offer—how it's worded and showcased in the communication.[4] Given the difficulty of getting students to respond to campus communications these days, a well-crafted offer is more important than ever.

So how do you create a compelling offer for prospective students? You need to think of what might be meaningful to students as they conduct their college search process. Today's high school students in particular are primarily focused on their own plans and their own worlds, and they want to know—quickly—why they should bother responding to you. Offering them a brochure about your institution, as appropriate as that might seem, doesn't address their immediate agenda.

At the same time, you also want an offer that generates valuable responses for your campus. Students will respond to an offer such as a drawing for an iPad or concert tickets, but then you would have no idea if students were responding for the prize or because they were genuinely interested in enrolling. The goal is to present an offer that provides valuable help for

students during their college search and that helps you build an inquiry pool full of the type students you want to enroll.

There's one other tidbit from Alan Rosenspan that I think is especially applicable to college direct marketing: "If you can tie your offer to your main benefit, it can be exponentially more effective."

We used that strategy with a campus partner, a health sciences university in the east. Our research with their target profile showed that prospective students interested in this school had a particularly strong interest in career directions. So we offered prospective students a "Free Academic and Career Guide" that showcased opportunities in the areas where the campus had academic programs.

Notice that the offer is essentially information, but it was presented in a way that would provide a high amount of perceived value to the students. It also allowed us to take the intangible (information) and make it tangible (a free guide). Of course, respondents also later received information about the university itself, but not until we had drawn them in by appealing to their primary interests. We also pumped up the presentation appeal by giving it a specific title and using the most essential word in direct marketing offers, "free."

In addition, we did not create an offer until we had researched the target audience. You have to understand what students want before you can craft an offer. Even if they share a common goal of getting a college education, students may respond to that goal (and communications offering that education) very differently from student to student.

Finally, test your offers. Testing competing offers determines which offers perform the best and will improve your return on investment. Even if you have an offer that is working well, testing may reveal an even better one.

4. Develop the right creative approach in college direct marketing

It's often been said that the second-most important word in direct marketing is *you*. When someone gets a direct mail letter or an e-mail, they want to hear what's in it for them. Prospective students are no different. They want to know how they will benefit by choosing your campus over another. However, when planning their messages, many campuses start with the question: What do *we* want to tell students about *ourselves*? What are *we* about? What do *we* offer? While it's true some

of those details may appeal to students, that approach doesn't put the student first and also does not necessarily include what the student wants to hear.

Here's a better approach: start by asking which topics are at the top of students' minds. By understanding their concerns, you can convey specific benefits that will seem much more pertinent and positive.

Increase the impact of your creative by basing it on research into student expectations

To do this, you really need to research your target audience. For campuses using our direct marketing services, Noel-Levitz conducts "Snapshot Research," a brief survey that provides insight into the expectations students have about attending college. This research provides the focus for the creative design and messaging strategies.

For the health sciences university I previously mentioned, we conducted Snapshot Research to determine how committed prospective students were to a particular course of study in the health sciences. Had they made up their minds or were they still shopping around for the right career field? Here's what we learned:

What best describes your outlook on a future career?

- I have a specific career direction in mind— 55%
- I have narrowed my choice to several fields— 36%
- I am open to a variety of career directions— 8%
- I have not thought much about a career— 1%

The research results told us that while half of the members of our target audience were making a beeline for a specific academic program, another 45 percent were still in decision-making mode.

These results came as a bit of a surprise, as the campus had conducted its previous campaign on the assumption that a student who had indicated pharmacy as an interest on a college-bound student list was indeed interested *only* in that field. Instead, we shifted our creative approach to indicate that the university offered a great many options in addition to pharmacy. This kind of research-based shift in messaging can make a significant difference in how students respond.

Develop great copy that sells your campus to the reader

Many campuses have writers working for their marketing departments. They may be very good writers who have crafted successful messages that the faculty, administrators, and president have approved. But can they write great *direct marketing* copy aimed at prospective students?

What makes for great college direct marketing copy?

1. Communications that focus on the benefits a student receives, not the features you offer.

2. Language that is economical yet motivational, with key messages conveyed through short sentences and paragraphs, bullet points, and active language that inspires action.

3. A voice that represents your institution while communicating in a style that the student can relate to.

4. Clear calls to action that are referenced multiple times so that the student knows exactly what to do next.

More than anything, direct marketing copy has to do more than simply inform students about your campus. It has to *sell* them on enrolling at your institution.

Test creative to find what really works

Just as market research can help you focus your creative more precisely on the needs and expectations of students, testing different creative packages can tell you what types of designs, formats, messages, and offers students will respond to. For example, one of our campus partners loved the self-mailer they had used the previous year. We recommended switching to a personalized letter, and when we tested that approach against the self-mailer, the letter resulted in a significant improvement in response.

Testing design can also reveal what is visually appealing to prospective students. Will they respond to a more simple and serious package? Creative that is more fun or youthful? These are the kinds of answers that you may not be able to determine if you do not test.

The key for creative is to remember that it is an art and a science. Research and data should inform your messaging and creative approach, but creating an effective direct marketing package also requires the art of convincing copy and

appealing design. It is arguably the number one thing many campuses think they can do but often do not do effectively.

5. Use technology more strategically in college direct marketing

The four strategies I just described will make your direct marketing more targeted and strategic. This final strategy can impact the efficiency and effectiveness at every stage of the search process.

For many campuses, the search mailing process used to consist of sending a printed, single self-mailer and perhaps a follow-up postcard. The results could be easily tracked through a manual response sheet and a student information system (SIS). Today, a new technological landscape of multiple channels to grab a student's interest has added complexity to the set up, execution, and tracking of search results.

In the section on building a better list, I discussed how predictive modeling is one of the most effective technologies for qualifying list purchases as well as your prospect and inquiry pools. Once you have your list and you're ready to create and send your communications, you have a wide array of options that can challenge even the most savvy campus marketers (social media, video, text, chats, and so on). However, there's one technological tool that's reliable, trackable, and used widely by students, one that should be the cornerstone of your marketing technology portfolio: e-mail.

To create a harmonious experience for students, your creative approach and message must match the technological platform you are using.

Keep e-mail a significant part of your communication flow

With the advent of social media, my colleagues and I frequently get questions about whether e-mail is still relevant to high school students. The answer is an emphatic yes! According to the 2013 Noel-Levitz E-Expectations survey of college-bound high school students, 98 percent of the respondents said they will open an e-mail from a college they are interested in, while 68 percent said they will open an e-mail from a college they do not know. Seventy-five percent said they were interested in using e-mail to communicate with campuses, and half cited campus e-mails as influential on their enrollment decisions.[5] Given these responses, e-mail is arguably one of the best tools in your direct marketing arsenal.

Make your communications mobile friendly

While e-mail is still very viable for direct marketing, the spread of mobile devices has changed some of the dynamics of e-mail communications. The same 2013 E-Expectations report I just mentioned also found that nearly 75 percent of college-bound juniors and seniors have regular access to mobile devices, 68 percent have visited a college Web site on a mobile device, and 43 percent use mobile devices for all of their online browsing.[6] This means that many students are viewing e-mails—as well as landing pages, Web sites, and social media sites—on mobile platforms. Your copy, designs, and programming have to take this into account, and designing for mobile screens is imperative whatever the age of your prospective student.

In a world where more and more students interact through the brief content of status updates and tweets, it's a good idea to use an economy of language in creating your e-mails and landing pages, regardless of whether students are reading via mobile devices or on PCs. Remember that college direct marketing campaigns are part of a process to gather inquiry and applicant information. The goal is to get the prospective student to declare legitimate interest as smoothly and easily as possible. You can obtain more information once the response is secured with follow-up cultivation communication and "tell us more about yourself" surveys.

Avoid the spam label

One other major difference between print mail and e-mail is deliverability. If your e-mail campaign gets flagged as spam, your carefully crafted and designed e-mails could go straight to junk folders or blocked altogether. Be sure to use software that scores e-mails for spam so that your e-mails get to your intended audience.

Server reputation is also very important. Too many e-mails reported as spam may result in major ISPs delaying or not sending your messages or possibly even blacklisting your server. Remember this could impact the rest of your campus constituencies that may share this outbound e-mail server such as athletics and alumni/development. This is why using in-house resources to send solicitations to prospective students who have not yet inquired is rarely a good idea.

Synchronize your creative approach, messages, and technology

To create a harmonious experience for students, your creative approach and message must match the technological platform you are using. Think of how the creative, message, and response process fit together. Take e-mail for example. Look at your subject line. Would it make you want to open your e-mail? Does the subject line fit in a mobile browser? Does the subject line match the message in the e-mail? Does the call to action make you want to take action?

Likewise, if a student clicks, does the landing page continue that experience in terms of message, action, and design? You need to make sure that students who do click on an e-mail go to a useful page and have clear direction on what to do when they get there. Otherwise, you risk stranding them on your home page or another page that offers no clear benefit to them.

Track, track again, and track some more

Tracking is perhaps the most useful technological innovation that is sadly under-utilized. One of the biggest advantages of moving to more electronic forms of communication for marketing is that you can track targets much more directly than you can through print or other forms of direct marketing.

Once your campaign has launched, be sure you are tracking all phases of communications. Analyze results by:

- List segments
- E-mails sent
- E-mails delivered
- E-mails opened
- E-mail links clicked
- Landing page visits
- Responses completed
- Students who applied
- Students who enrolled

Tracking these can pinpoint success and challenges in your direct marketing campaign. You can also analyze these results by funnel segment to reveal potential challenges to moving prospective students toward enrollment.

Applying the lessons of college direct marketing: A case study

Now that we understand these five strategies, how do they work in practice? The following case study illustrates how one campus, the University of Dallas, successfully implemented these principles. The University of Dallas is a four-year private institution that emphasizes academics and a strong Catholic culture. To meet its enrollment goals and maintain its profile, it casts a wider, national net for its students, with half coming from outside Texas.

This broader search for students makes it imperative for the university to have a strong list, so that it doesn't disperse its limited resources by buying names that will not respond. This is why the campus used predictive modeling—which ranks students by their likelihood to enroll—to shape its list and prioritize the students in its pool. Use of a statistical, data-informed approach allowed the University of Dallas to add significant numbers of high quality leads that met the university's desired characteristics.

This approach to list building also helps with communication timing, the second key strategy. Knowing students operate on their own schedules—some students begin their college search as early as sophomore year, others in senior year—the University of Dallas targeted new test-takers with multiple direct marketing campaigns. This strategy allowed the university to get their brand and benefits to its targets when the individual students were ready to begin the college search process.

To create compelling offers and make their creative unique, the University of Dallas did more than ask students to "learn more." They offered a free guide that would help students with their college searches—which students of course had to reply to receive, helping to generate inquiries. The creative also pushed the strong academic offerings and small class sizes to appeal to prospective students. Perhaps most importantly, the creative put the student at the center of the messaging and avoided the institutional "we."

Finally, the University used a number of technological tools to help it deliver and track the campaign. Noel-Levitz predictive modeling not only helped the university shape its target lists, but also prioritize inquiries. The predictive model, combined with appended Personix data, made

it possible for the direct marketing campaigns to target key audience segments that the University of Dallas wanted enroll. Personalized e-mails and PURLs (personalized URLs for each target) helped make the communications feel more individual to the students (meshing with the message of more individual attention in the classroom) and track the response from the campaign.

Ultimately, the University of Dallas managed to accomplish a number of goals after it revamped its direct marketing approach. It doubled its applications over two years and saw a 7 percent increase for one particularly important demographic, all while lowering its discount rate. These results made the hard work and investment in a systematic direct marketing campaign worth it.

About the author

Pegi Anton is a higher education marketing professional with nearly 25 years of experience in the field. She offers extensive experience in campus marketing, communication flows, and digital print strategy. During her career, she has consulted with more than 100 campuses, both public and private.

About Noel-Levitz

Noel-Levitz is a nationally recognized higher education consulting firm that focuses on strategic planning for enrollment and student success. Each year, campus executives from throughout the United States meet regularly with Noel-Levitz to accomplish their goals for student recruitment, marketing, student retention, financial aid, and strategic enrollment management.

Since 1973, Noel-Levitz has partnered with more than 2,800 colleges and universities throughout North America. The firm offers executive consulting, custom research and benchmark data, innovative tools and technologies, side-by-side plan development and execution, and resources for professional development.

For more information, visit www.noellevitz.com.

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