DIGITAL MARKETING FOR HIGHER ED:

REVIEWING 2012 TRENDS TO JUMP START 2013

Higher Education Marketing

ANALYTICS-DRIVEN MARKETING SOLUTIONS FOR HIGHER ED

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A WORD FROM PHIL

Wow! 2012 was a really busy year for digital marketing. Facebook introduced its new Timeline, Google+ gained momentum, Pinterest showed us the importance of pinning, the “not provided” keyword in Google Analytics puzzled search marketers, Instagram was purchased by Facebook …we could go on and on!

Just as 2012 brought out a slew of new blooms, 2013 promises innovative shifts, and everyone here at Higher Education Marketing is really excited to dive into new conversations about what’s happened, what to expect, and how the two intertwine.

To give you and everyone concerned with digital marketing for higher education a jump start on 2013, we decided to reflect on the topics and trends that were most important to our readers in 2012 and then look at them a little closer and gain some perspective on what to expect in the coming year.

This eBook is a digest of those popular topics and blog posts; we hope you find it useful.

Happy reading!

Philippe Taza, CEO - Digital Analyst

ANALYTICS

Philippe Taza, CEO - Digital Analyst

Digital marketing in higher ed has truly come of age in 2012. If institutions have not yet adopted them, they acknowledge the pressing need to integrate analytics, search engine optimization (SEO), search engine marketing (SEM), and social media into their marketing plans. In digital marketing, the race is more about keeping up than staying ahead.

Analytics present formidable tools for determining return on investment, with some activities being much more measurable in aggregate. Lead attribution remains a challenge as it is still difficult to track exactly what is producing results. However, we can expect more lead attribution tools to emerge and help all of us answer these questions in 2013.

One of the biggest challenges in 2013 will be to determine where to spend scarce resources and how to integrate that with traditional offline marketing activities, and then track results through analytics and into CRM tools. Marketers will be working hard to track ROI on everything to get better data on individual tactics and campaigns, and determine total effect and ROI on their global marketing mix.

Budgets seem to be increasing at the expense of more traditional marketing activities, and this is likely to continue. As colleges and universities increase their online course content, they are now struggling with finding the budget and know-how to market them. MOOCs are disrupting the traditional university business model but without a clear indication of how they will replace it. The impact of this and other technologies like online interactive video and chat will attract more interest.

Here are a few of our Analytics-focused blog posts that you enjoyed most in 2012:

- Three Aspects of Managing Web Analytics for Higher Ed
- Tips on How to Develop Google Analytics Goals for Your Higher Ed Website

Three Aspects of Managing Web Analytics for Higher Ed

Managing analytics for a higher ed institution can get pretty complicated. It takes a range of skills sets, of varying levels of sophistication to do it well. In a recent blog post, Avinesh Kaushik, Google's Digital Marketing Evangelist, breaks down web analytics into its three component parts and then discusses some of the individual skills sets and capabilities that individuals require to manage these areas well.

In higher education marketing these three aspects bring some specific challenges that I thought would be worth pointing out.

1) Data Capture

This first aspect involves the configuration of analytics so that you can accurately capture data on the traffic patterns and behavior of your visitors.

In its simplest form this involves a quick account setup and pasting the appropriate analytics tracking code into your web pages. On a simple site this is quite easy to implement and shazam, you start to get your tracking data. The problem is that higher ed web ecosystems are not simple. In fact they are generally very complicated with multiple domains, need multiple profiles, have mobile sites , flash, events , have complicated goals and registration funnels, link to CRMs, etc. These elements all quickly create some serious configuration and coding challenges that are not for the faint of heart (or beginner). Very sophisticated cross domain tracking codes may be required to fully track and capture the activity of your visitors across your complete web ecosystem. If you have a complicated web ecosystem as described above you may need the help of a configuration expert to do this well.

2) Data Reporting

So now that you have your analytics set up to capture traffic data you need to summarize that data into actionable reports. It should not be a surprise that to report on the complicated web ecosystem we described above, you end up getting into serious complications in reporting. It gets even more challenging when you have a number of different individuals who need to see reports, from summary level stuff to your boss, to different big picture perspectives for marketing vs. admissions, to different segments of the traffic "pie" for different schools, departments, initiatives or events. These different users, all having different objectives need different information to track their progress towards their goals. I am always surprised when we look into a school's analytics and don't see reporting linked to the objectives of the individuals involved. Why not have your analytics report to you on a monthly basis if you are on track to meet the goals that you will be measured on at the end of the year in your performance appraisal?

3) Data Analysis

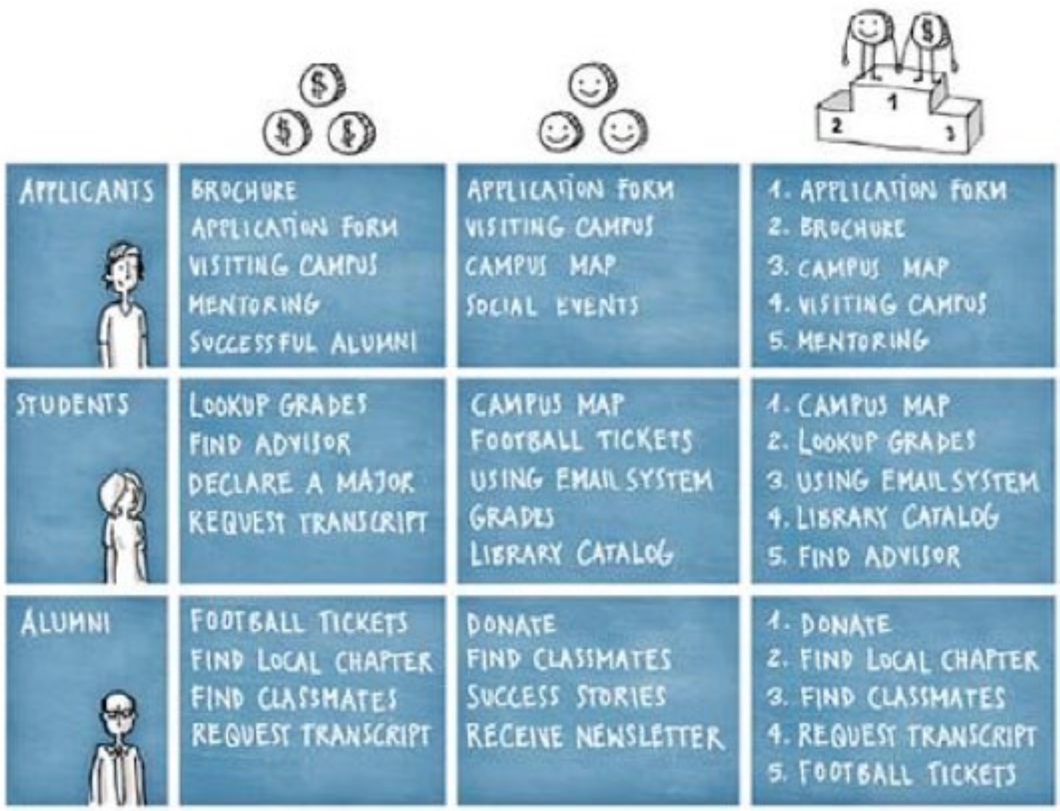
This is where analytics should truly shine but is often the part that is least well done. That's partly because it is quite hard to do it well unless you have the experience, training and discipline to manage it. As we all experienced, the first time we looked into a Google Analytics account, analytics is overwhelming in the detail, and not particularly helpful in directing you to what is most important. But of course that's because what is important is different for everyone and only you can figure it out. You have to decide what is important to you and then set up your analytics to analyze and report on it.

So the first and most important step is to determine what your objectives are and what Key Performance Indicators will measure them. KPIs should be driven by business/marketing objectives and a deep understanding of what visitor behavior is the best indicator of moving towards that objective. Once you have your KPI's you can set up goals for them, allowing you to highlight their performance and easily track your progress with them. You can also determine what you think the financial value of a "goal" is and add that to your analysis (i.e. an organic lead generated by your marketing might be worth $50 to you based on what your conversion rate on that type of lead). To do this kind of work well you need someone who can think as a high level business analyst and strategist, who understands the idiosyncrasies of higher education but who also understands the data capture part and the reporting part to integrate the three aspects and make your analytics sizzle and hum. This is a very high level analytics skill set that managers strive to develop internally but often need to seek outside help to obtain.

As a manager responsible for your institution's digital marketing you rely on your analytics to tell you how your marketing plans are performing and where to direct (and redirect) your scare resources most effectively. Next time you get that feeling of being overwhelmed by the complexity of your analytics, try breaking the issue down into these three aspects and the light will get a little brighter in the tunnel.

Tips on How to Develop Google Analytics Goals for Your Higher Ed Website

What are the goals of your college or university website? This is a pretty simple question that elicits very complicated answers. Higher ed websites are complex marketing and communications organisms, driven by competition from your school's business objectives, the needs of your wide ranging audiences and the practicalities of managing web real estate and functionality.



Source: Smashing Magazine

So, given this scale of complexity, how does a website manager tackle the integration of these competing interests and translating them into actionable Google Analytics Goals that can be monitored, managed and continuously improved upon.

Tip 1) Identify the business objectives of the website

Regardless of how complicated your particular situation is, I'll bet money there is someone that you talk to at least once a week, (usually a VP, Dean or Director) who has five or so very clear and specific business objectives for your website (or part of the website). They may be captured in your operational marketing plans, in your strategic plans, in your IT plan or in manager's specific performance objectives. I am pretty sure about this because when Higher Education Marketing enters into projects with schools, this is one of the first thing we ask for to help us understand where an institution is and where it's going. These web objectives are often dispersed across different manager's or different department's objectives. Sometimes they don't even know that the others exist. My point here is that if you can bring these things together into one place and integrate them, then you will be in much better position to manage the complex interdepartmental politics and priorities of your institution and more importantly to reach your website's business objectives.

And if they do not exist, then create them. If they need to be updated, get to it. These are the blueprints for your website's overall success.

The table above provides a simple, but effective example of one way to examine your user constituencies and their needs, identify the business objectives that apply to each constituency, and then to begin to prioritize those interests.

(I do appreciate that this is easier said than done but trust me if you get this piece nailed down it will make things much simpler and much more productive down the road.)

Tip 2) Translate your website's business objectives into Google Analytics Goals

The next step in creating Google Analytics Goals is to identify the Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) that truly drive your business objectives. This step is not as easy as it seems. It takes time to study your traffic, visitor preferences and conversion paths for deep insights into your customer behavior and intent. You may not believe this but you are the best qualified source to do this, (but a digital marketing consultant can help here if needed). As a way to begin, you might start by defining fairly simple metrics, like page views of your "Thank you for Registering in this Course "page. These kinds of simple metrics work but the real power of Google Analytics Goals is to identify and work with metrics that have a deeper impact on the performance of your business.

This is an example of the Google Analytics interface used to set up a Goal.

Let me demonstrate with a simple example for the most common of higher ed website objectives, which is of course, “To Generate Registrations”. Let’s say, through careful tracking and analysis of the recruitment funnel at your institution, you know that inquiries from engaged, prospective students for detailed information about financial assistance is an extremely good indicator of student’s interest and their propensity to register. So your Google Analytics goal might become tracking and increasing the number of requests from prospective students for information on financial assistance. You can quantify this action by tracking the number of visitor page views on the financial assistance page on your site. As a final step in this process, set an expectation for what your baseline activity should be.

So to summarize:

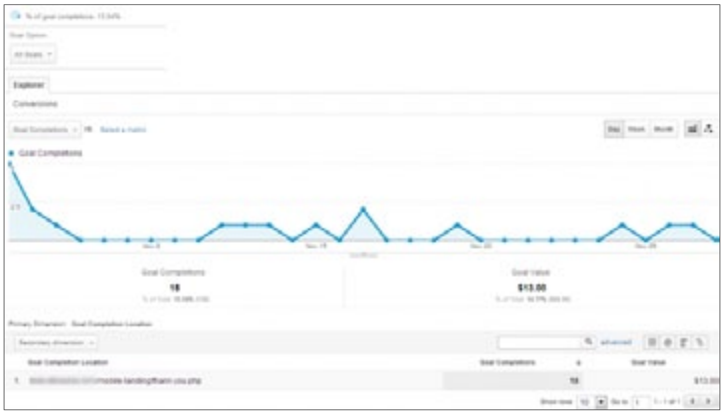
- Business objective = increase total registrations
- Google Analytics Goal = page views of financial assistance page
- Monthly goal = 50 page views of financial assistance page

Now you have a goal set up. Repeat the process and apply it to your other main business objectives to produce 5-10 Google Analytics Goals. You have now created a very powerful focus on 5-10 KPIs that if improved on, should give you’re the improved results you’re after.

Tip 3) Monitor performance of your Goals, continue to refine them and set new ones as needed.

Your goal is now defined and it's up to you to begin the challenging work of improving your performance. As traffic flows through your site and your goal is tracked, your analytics reports begin to reveal the insights you need into your visitor traffic and behavior to better serve the searcher's intent (and reach the institution's business objectives). Maybe you begin by adjusting your architecture to get visitors to that page more efficiently. Maybe you update the page copy to be clearer. Maybe you optimize your "Request Information" button to attract more clicks.

This is an example of a typical Google Analytics Goal Completion Report.



As you dig deeper you may realize that the KPI you thought was so important turns out to be a dud and not so useful after all. That's ok. It is a normal part of the learning curve. Careful consideration and learning about what's driving conversions is one of the most important stages in this cyclical revision process. The goal here is continuous improvement. Replace it with an improved goal, learn from the experience and move forward.

As new programs are introduced, new priorities are set by executives and market conditions change, new goals will be required to focus your site performance on these new priorities. But be cautious here. Just because, you might be redesigning your site, does not mean all you goals will change. Focus on continuous improvement over time; embracing the new priorities while sustaining the tried and true KPIs that you know produce results.

Final Thoughts

Implementing Google Analytics Goals provides you with an amazingly effective opportunity to use marketing analytics as a tool to focus and drive your higher ed business. If you tie your GA Goals tightly to your business objectives and visitor needs, and focus on a few really important ones, the task of managing your very complex website gets distilled down into a more manageable state with clearer objectives and daily tasks. Try it, we think you will like it!

EDUCATION LEAD GENERATION

Scott Duncan, Business Development Consultant

Prospective student lead generation is a primary role of the college and university website. In 2012 we saw a significant maturing in the marketplace of colleges' approach, management and execution of online lead generation. Many institutions have done this well in the past, but now lead generation is a primary requirement in almost all college marketing plans. 2012 stats indicate that many schools that previously relied on outside agencies to produce leads are now bringing this mission-critical activity in-house.

This has led post-secondary institutions to become more active in identifying and developing new sources for leads. Pay-Per-Click networks, social media and mobile marketing are all effective and commonly used channels for targeting and generating new student leads. More institutions are adopting the practice of producing campaign-specific landing pages to support their marketing activities with solid landing page design and conversion optimization practices being put in place.

Colleges and universities continue to invest heavily in social media to engage with their prospective and enrolled student audiences. Social media has proven itself to be a very good tool with which to maintain prospect interest but the jury is still out with respect to its effectiveness in engaging new prospects. The efficacy of new lead generation through Facebook, YouTube, LinkedIn, Pinterest and a host of other social media platforms will be more fully tested in 2013 by college marketers to determine whether they deserve more marketing dollars.

In 2012, responsive design and mobile college websites have garnered an increasing share of overall site traffic across the higher ed web spectrum. Increases in mobile lead generation have naturally followed this trend with an increasing share of leads available to those institutions who are riding this wave. Competition for mobile leads will increase in 2013 as more institutions develop budgets and the skill-set to operate in this rapidly expanding channel.

In the meantime, here are a few of our 2012 lead generation-focused blog posts that were a big hit with our readers:

- Strategies for Creating High Quality Content for Lead Generation in Higher Ed
- How to Generate More Student Leads from Your Higher Ed Website Using Conversion Rate Optimization (CRO)

Strategies for Creating High Quality Content for Lead Generation in Higher Ed

If you post to your college or university's blog to engage prospective students then you know how difficult it can be to regularly and repeatedly come up with interesting and relevant topics to write about. Staring at that blank page on the screen with a rapidly approaching deadline is an awful feeling. But rest assured, there are some strategies you can use to make the task a bit easier, improve the relevance of what you write and even more importantly, help you meet the marketing objectives you are writing for in the first place.

When you are creating content for your blog you have two very important audiences to keep in mind, the prospective student and the search engine spider.

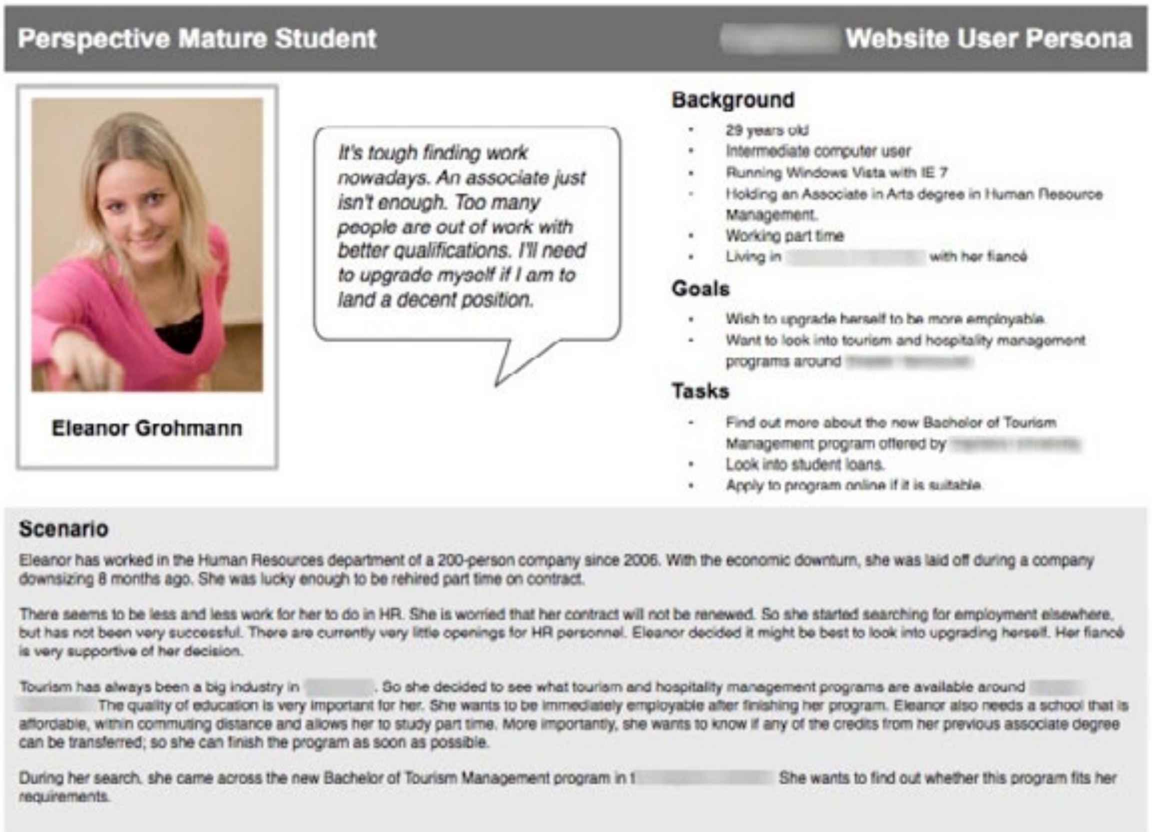
For the student, you want to create engaging, relevant content that will be of interest, and use, to your target audience so that they will take notice of your school, want to learn more about it and hopefully, consider attending.

For the search engine spider, you want to create relevant, keyword-rich documents that will increase your organic ranking for your priority short and long-tail keyword phrases, therefore increasing the likely number of prospective student visitors to your website who are searching on those keywords.

1) Here are two strategies to help tackle the first objective of creating high quality content targeted at your student audience.

a) Break down your total audience into customer personas and create customized content for each of them. Customer personas are "fictional characters created to represent the different user types within a targeted demographic, attitude and/or behavior set that might use a site, brand or product in a similar way." (Wikipedia)

Here’s an example of a student persona:


Perspective Mature Student [illegible] **Website User Persona**

Eleanor Grohmann

It's tough finding work nowadays. An associate just isn't enough. Too many people are out of work with better qualifications. I'll need to upgrade myself if I am to land a decent position.

Background

- 29 years old
- Intermediate computer user
- Running Windows Vista with IE 7
- Holding an Associate in Arts degree in Human Resource Management.
- Working part time
- Living in [illegible] with her fiancé

Goals

- Wish to upgrade herself to be more employable.
- Want to look into tourism and hospitality management programs around [illegible]

Tasks

- Find out more about the new Bachelor of Tourism Management program offered by [illegible]
- Look into student loans.
- Apply to program online if it is suitable.

Scenario

Eleanor has worked in the Human Resources department of a 200-person company since 2006. With the economic downturn, she was laid off during a company downsizing 8 months ago. She was lucky enough to be rehired part time on contract.

There seems to be less and less work for her to do in HR. She is worried that her contract will not be renewed. So she started searching for employment elsewhere, but has not been very successful. There are currently very little openings for HR personnel. Eleanor decided it might be best to look into upgrading herself. Her fiancé is very supportive of her decision.

Tourism has always been a big industry in [illegible]. So she decided to see what tourism and hospitality management programs are available around [illegible] The quality of education is very important for her. She wants to be immediately employable after finishing her program. Eleanor also needs a school that is affordable, within commuting distance and allows her to study part time. More importantly, she wants to know if any of the credits from her previous associate degree can be transferred; so she can finish the program as soon as possible.

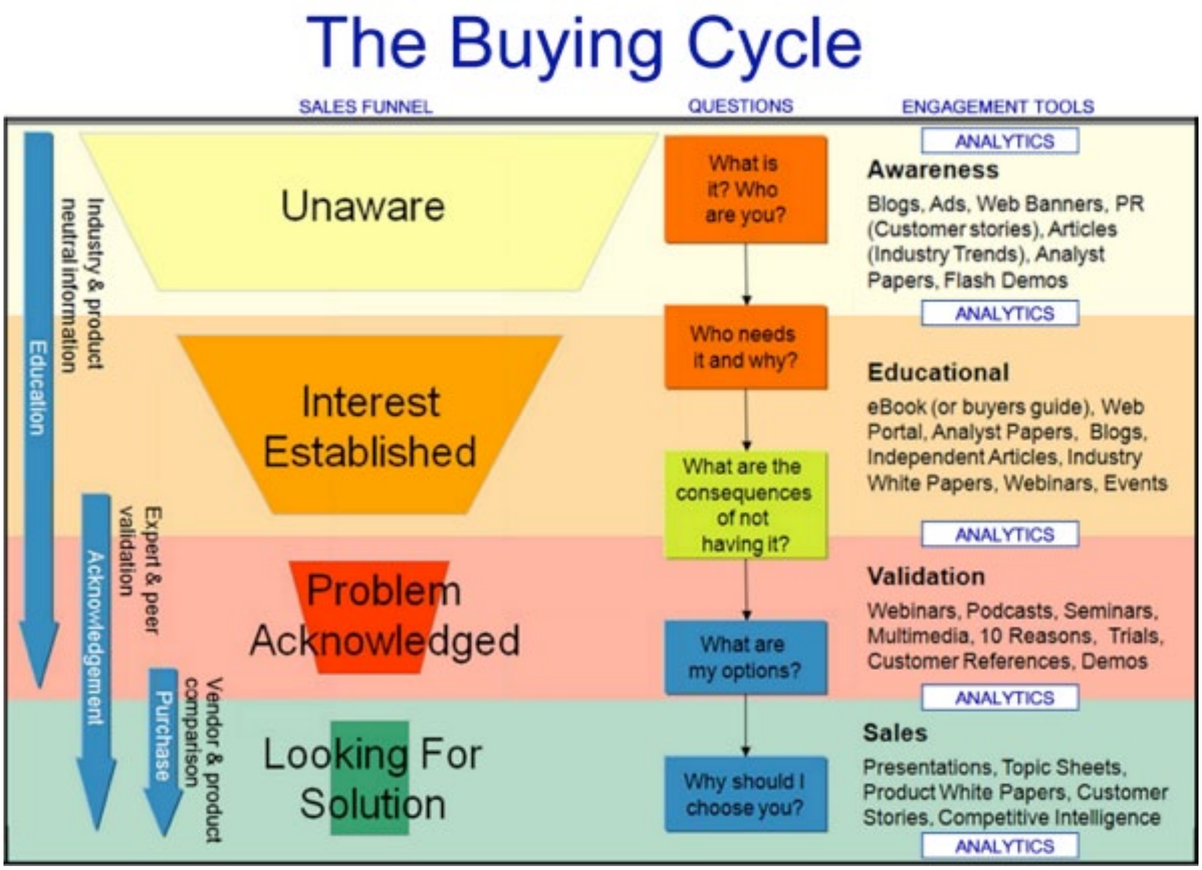
During her search, she came across the new Bachelor of Tourism Management program in [illegible] She wants to find out whether this program fits her requirements.

With this type of detailed persona of a hypothetical student in hand, it’s much easier to identify unique topics that this “individual” will find interesting and useful. Brainstorm to generate topics based on their demographic characteristics and psychographic needs and develop your content for them, in as direct, and as personal a way as you can.

b) Create targeted content at multiple entry points of your recruitment funnel.

Select topics and generate content that is targeted at the interests and needs of individuals entering your recruitment funnel at its different entry points, i.e., information package request, open house, campus tour, etc. For example. create a blog post with copy, pictures and visiting student’s comments, describing in detail the most interesting stop on your campus tour. Target topics, places and things that a prospective student at the tipping point of entering your recruitment funnel can relate to. Try and mentally step into their shoes and ask yourself what questions they have in their minds at that moment and write about it.

In the graphic below you can see some examples of how different formats for content might be applied to address the changing requirements of a prospective student, as they move through their "buying cycle":

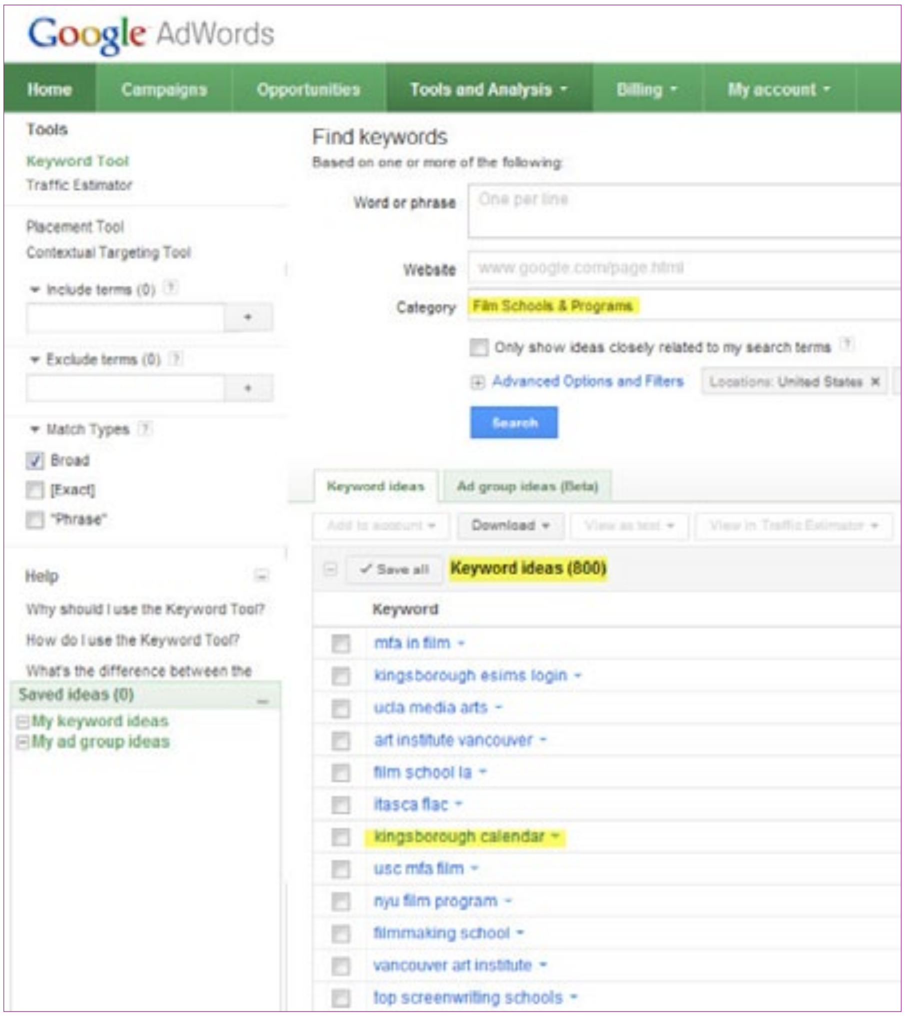


Source: www.sigmawebmarketing.com

2) Now let's consider strategies for identifying topics for content development motivated by our search engine optimization priorities.

a) Configure Google Analytics to track your internal site search and identify the most common queries that visitors make when inside your site. This list of search topics is an excellent place to start writing about. It provides value to your visitors by creating content that pre-empts their need to go any further looking for information and beefs up your SEO for these key topics all at the same time.

b) Use the Google Adwords Tool to identify topics related to your main targeted keywords that have the most traffic volume and then write about them. Adword's Keyword Tool will also provide an almost endless list of variations on keywords, providing you with suggestions for related phrases that can be great inspiration for a new angle or new approach to a priority topic that you want to write about.



c) Use Q & A sites like Linked in Answers or Quora to see what kinds of questions are being asked about the topics that relate most directly to your type of programs and start to write about them.

When you create your website content you should always write first and foremost for your target audience. Don't try to write specifically for SEO because it will sound like it and be ineffective on both sides of the fence. Use the search engine optimization strategies we have talked about here to focus your editorial plan on the best topics, and your SEO rankings will take care of themselves.

How to Generate More Student Leads from Your Higher Ed Website Using Conversion Rate Optimization (CRO)

Your boss says you need to generate more student leads and it is your job to figure out how to get them.

Most college and university marketing managers would respond to this challenge by looking to their traditional lead generation options – general advertising, PPC, SEO, SEM local event marketing, etc – and determine where they could get the best impact with the budget they have at hand.

Often overlooked in this scenario is an extremely effective online marketing strategy called Conversion Rate Optimization or CRO. Essentially CRO is the process of increasing the performance of your existing web pages, through content and design refinement and testing, to increase goal conversion rates (i.e. lead generation) from your existing visitor traffic.

DEFINITION

Conversion optimization or **conversion rate optimization** is a method of creating an experience for a website or landing page visitor with the goal of increasing the percentage of visitors that convert into customers. It is also commonly referred to as CRO. (Source: Wikipedia)

At this point in discussing CRO with general marketing types, the question often comes up, “Why do we have to do this? I thought that our recent redesign of the website dramatically improved its design, form and function. Do you mean we have to keep revising pages?” Well, the short answer is yes. Your new design and new pages are probably great but if you want your pages, calls to action, forms, registration funnels and landing pages to perform at the highest level, you must upgrade them to operate as such. That’s what CRO does. It’s sort of like buying a beautiful new sports car out of a dealership and then taking it directly to your high performance mechanic to upgrade various parts to run it on an Indy racetrack.

So how do you do CRO?

The CRO process involves four main steps:

- Identifying opportunities to make improvements to your pages that you think will improve their performance
- Testing them to quantify the impact of the changes and confirm that they are having the intended result,
- Implementing those improvements and
- starting the cycle over again to keep continuously improving your overall site’s performance.

Identifying opportunities to improve the conversion performance of your pages

For detailed guidance on this topic I refer you to the work of Brian Eisenberg, one of the founding fathers of CRO. One of his guiding principles is that of the conversion trinity, that being the three key factors to consider to successfully improve your click-throughs or conversions. See [Eisenberg's blog post on this topic] for a more details (and the source of the paragraph below).

Eisenberg's Conversion Trinity includes:

- Relevance – i.e. Are you relevant to my wants/needs/desires (search query)? Have you maintained scent/ad consistency?
- Value – i.e. Do I know why you are the right solution for me? Have you explained your value proposition/offer well?
- Call to action – i.e. Is it obvious what I need to do next? Have you given me the confidence to take that action?

Simply stated, if you wish to improve conversions on any particular page, carefully consider these three page factors and identify ways to improve one or more of them. Once you have your best "hypothesis" of what will most likely improve its performance, create a variation page that includes the improvement and test it.

Google Analytics Content Experiments can then be used to set-up and conduct an A/B test of the two pages. It is still fairly early days for this recently released Google product so it's still a work in progress. It has a few kinks and not all of its operational assumptions are fully know yet but regardless it is a very powerful testing tool and will continue to improve.

So you still may be skeptical that CRO can make that significant an impact on your overall page performance and specifically your lead generation numbers, so let's take a look at a real example, that produced some pretty dramatic results.

This test was on a call to action button on the landing page for a US PPC campaign for a large community college in the states. It is a high volume PPC campaign which allowed for the test to be concluded within one week, at a 99% confidence level. To focus the story (and to protect the confidentiality of the client), I have only included the call to action buttons from the original and the test pages. A click on these buttons submitted the prospect student's request for information and personal contact information. Content Experiments sets up and measures the A/B test against a particular goal that you define. In this case the goal of the test was the thank-you page presented to a prospect who successfully entered their contact information into the lead generation form. Everything else on the two test pages was exactly the same.

The **original call to action button** looked like this:

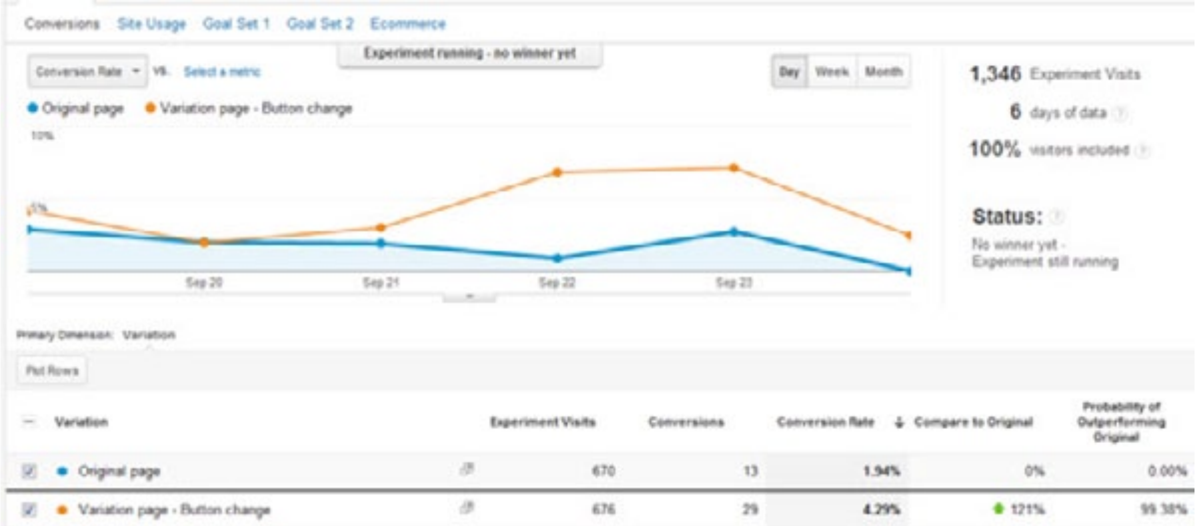
The **variation call to action button** looked like this:

The hypothesis for improvement to the button addressed two of Eisenberg's Conversion Trinity factors:

- **Value** – The button offered more specific value to the prospect by including the verb "Get" and by specifically identifying the "Info Package".

- **Call to Action** – Black text was used to improve readability and bring more visual emphasis to the button vs. the rest of the page.

Here are the results of the test as provided by Google Content Experiments within Google Analytics:



The new button dramatically outperformed the original button with a very high confidence level. It doubled the conversion rate and produced more than twice as many leads during the test period.

Over 6 days the new button produced 29 leads, the old button produced 13. Conversions increased by 121%.

This example makes CRO look fairly simple but it's not. In fact it is much more complicated that changing an image, some text or a background colour. In countless examples where a test's results seemed certain, I have been surprised and been wrong about the outcome. There are certainly some general best practices that will give you improvements in results but even the experts in the field will tell you not to make assumption about your tests, to always focus on developing a hypothesis based on the key conversion factors and test your pages thoroughly.

So the next time you are reviewing your lead generation and recruitment performance metrics and are reminded of your need for more leads, don't limit your thinking to investing your budget on advertising, PPC or events. Take a hard look at your site's key pages where you generate most of your lead conversions and deeply consider how you can improve them.

You might be surprised by how many more leads you can convert from you existing traffic.

CONTENT DEVELOPMENT

Rima Hammoudi, Editor

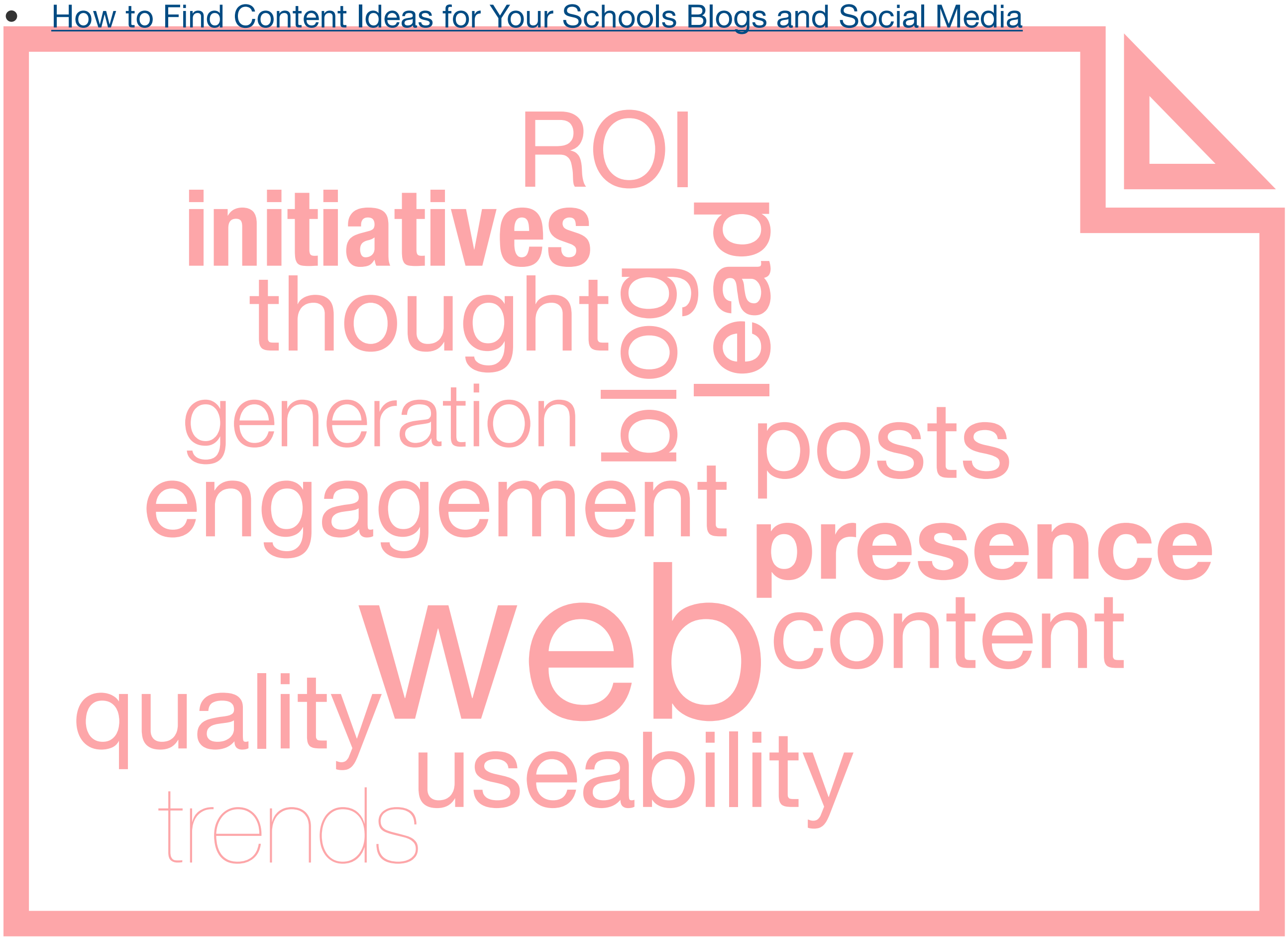
People are increasingly becoming aware of the effect content has on overall web presence. For colleges and universities, the importance of content is two-fold: not only do you want to create content that encourages students to engage in creative and original thought, but you also want content that works towards the overall ROI of all of your web initiatives.

It can be tricky to understand how to reach both of these aims, but the key ingredient to powerful and resourceful content is quality. Even if it isn't said outright, all of the content discussions we have are underlined with the idea that top-quality content will encourage usability, engagement, and most importantly, lead generation.

There is no doubt that the conversation on content will continue in 2013 and many years ahead. We're all really looking forward to seeing how content trends will shift as more and more people adopt the practice of quality over quantity for all levels of web content.

For now, let's take a look at two of our content-focused blog posts that our readers enjoyed the most:

- 4 Steps to Dramatically Improve Your College's Website Content
- How to Find Content Ideas for Your Schools Blogs and Social Media



4 Steps to Dramatically Improve Your College's Website Content

The quality of your college's website relies heavily on great content. Many schools have understood the importance of great content and thus have moved their web offices from IT to marketing. Quality content allows you to enhance the richness and usability of your website, and without it your efforts to bring attention to your campus and programs and to have visitors take action on your website will be of no avail.

Here are 4 steps to ensure your site's content is and remains compelling:

Audit

The purpose of the audit phase is to answer the following questions:

- What content do we have on our site?
- Is it useful to our prospects? Does it help us reach our objectives?
- Where does it live?
- Who is responsible for it?

In order to answer these questions, you will need to look at the quantitative and qualitative aspects of each page on your website.

The **quantitative** part of the audit should include, for each page:

- Page title
- URL
- Character count
- Last updated
- Content type (Html, form, PDF)
- Calls to action
- Picture/video content
- Name of the person who is in charge of the page

The **qualitative** audit requires that you dive more deeply and try to find answers to these questions:
What does your content say? Is it relevant and useful?
What was the original purpose of this page? Was this purpose met? Does your content meet your prospects' possible expectations? Does it resonate with them? Identify gaps between your marketing goals when writing these pages and the end result.

Is your content still accurate?
Websites are revamped every few years. During that time, they are not often updated. Are all of the programs listed on your site still offered? Do they still have the same format? What has changed? What can you do to make sure the content is as accurate as possible?

Is your content well written?
Are sentences or paragraphs too long? Is it hard for one to understand a point? Is it catchy enough for your audience?

> Granted, because of how subjective preferences can be it can be difficult to gauge the caliber of your content. What you consider to be well written may be terrible in your colleague's eyes. That said, it is important to develop a 'voice' for your website, one that reflects your college's nature and philosophy. Once you establish an overall tone, it will become easy to judge whether or not a piece of content succeeds in representing your college the way you want it to.

Is your content findable?
By using Web analytics, you check how your keywords are faring on search engines. Are you using the best keywords for your school? Could there be others that you are not using? Focus on using the most relevant keywords.

The audit phase can be long and tedious, but it is crucial to help you determine the natural following step to develop your content.

Analyze

Based on the results of the audit phase, you should be able to answer the following:

- **What is not working according to our objectives?**
- **What should we delete or repurpose?**
- **What content (if any) needs to be created?**

You should also take a few moments to look at what your competitors are doing. Visit some of your competitors' website to see the type of content that is crucial for prospective students that may be missing from your college's website. Without going into a full-fledged audit of their websites, make an effort to notice the feel of the website, the purpose, tone, and length of the content.

Strategize

The strategy phase is meant to create accountability and clearly define what the website should be like and what goals it should meet and.

Prioritize content creation or revisions

What are the key themes, messages and topics your school wants to focus on? Based on the answer and the content analysis carried out earlier, determine what content needs to be developed first. At the beginning, your focus should be on homepages, landing sites and subsections' main pages. Top-level marketing pages on which you want students to land should also be among your priorities. Decide on the best tone and structure to convey your messages.

Determine how users will find your content

Whether you are focusing on search engines or social media, recommendations need to include keywords, metadata, and take into account the overall communication strategy of your school. Will your students find this content through a newsletter? Social media? On their mobile phone? All this needs to be discussed as it will impact your content creation.

Decide on a content management strategy

How often will the content be published? Who will be responsible for each section? Management of content is often undermined. For example, it's one thing to want to host a blog, but with that comes original topic ideas, research, and a regular posting schedule. Your pages need to be updated and relevant at all times, and this requires stringent management and maintenance of content.

Implement

1. Create an editorial calendar including a breakdown of all steps.

2. Gather and educate to avoid common content strategy mistakes : It is very rare for only one person to be responsible for all of content on a college's website. Get everyone around the table to make sure everyone understands what is at stake. Discuss the main goals that the college aims to reach, the biggest ideas your college wants to communicate, and the tone your college would like to have online. Be transparent about what you want to see online.

3. Schedule editorial meetings for planning new features and coordinating efforts. These editorial meetings should be focused on dividing up work with your team.

4. Start seeing content strategy everywhere: this is a work in process. You need to see what works and what does not. Quality assessments will be necessary to be successful in the long term.

Further reading

- Case study: see what North Carolina State is doing to improve its content.
- *Content Strategy from the Web* by Kristina Halvorson.
- Susan Evans tackles the issue of content strategy and time constraints.

How to Find Content Ideas for Your Schools Blogs and Social Media

Many schools have decided to host a school blog and become more involved in social media in order to enhance their online presence. With this comes the realization that blogs require close monitoring, constant up-keep, and interesting content. People often ask us about the ways school bloggers (be it a student, alumnus, or faculty member) can feed their blog and social media profiles on a regular basis. Admittedly, this can be difficult at the beginning, but with the right tools and practices, the entire blog experience can be easy and really enjoyable. So here are 6 easy ways to find and create relevant content for your school.

1. Curate content that interests you: Identify blogs or sites that explore topics that matter to your students and affiliate organizations. As you land on interesting webpages, be sure to register to their RSS feed in order to receive all the updates. A great way to centralize your favorite RSS feeds is by using a news aggregator, like Google Reader, where you can view all your target news or blogs in one single spot. All of us here really enjoy Google Reader, mostly because of its user-friendly organizational structure, but there are many more aggregators out there for you to choose from. Once you set up your aggregator account, all you'll have to do is scan through your customized scroll of posts regularly to find articles to share or to spark ideas for future blog posts.

On an individual level, Twitter and other social media platforms are fairly easy to maintain. But when you're tweeting on behalf of an entire school (plus organizing events, plus monitoring other campaigns, plus plus plus…) time quickly becomes a luxury. There is a variety of free tools out there to manage your social media accounts and share content throughout your different profiles. One of the reasons we like Hootsuite is that it allows you to download a bookmarklet and to schedule the post directly from the article page you are reading (no more copying, pasting and link reducing necessary!). It also includes an AutoSchedule feature to send out your social media updates at peak times for your audience. Talk about a time-saver!

2. Use curation sites: Similar to RSS feeds, curation sites allow you to gather all of the interesting bits you find online. The difference is that curation sites allow you to showcase your collection of favorites. Pinterest, Scoop.it, Feedly are all examples of such sites. They are great to discover new topics or trends associated with your interests and find new resources. Pinterest can also inspire you for visuals to be associated with your content marketing.

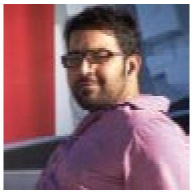
3. **Look for trending topics:** Twitter is the perfect tool to see what's hot in a particular industry or category. Thanks to your social media management platform, you can follow industry keywords, such as nursing, business management and many others. Identify relevant hashtags to follow conversations about topics you care about. For example, #edchat, #pse and #highered are very popular hashtags for higher education in North America.

4. **Use student-created content:** Student-created content often brings a degree of authenticity and a peer worldview to your social media marketing message. Many colleges and universities have set up Student Social Media Ambassador teams and rely on their students for blogging and/or updating their social media profiles. See what St. Michael's college in Vermont has done. Student-created content can also be as simple as hosting photo-contests or essay contests, or you can ask students to post questions on Twitter or Facebook, and post your response on your blog.

5. **Create a content calendar:** Take the stress out of your week by deciding preparing a monthly calendar of what you will be discussing on your blog and in social media. Planning will allow you to highlight events and on- and off-campus activities without feeling rushed at the last minute. It will also enable you to run weekly or monthly themes to strengthen your messages. Be as precise as possible about the links and images that will be associated with the content you will be posting to save time when publishing.

6. **Leverage data:** Data is essential to track all marketing efforts. One of the best ways to know what your students are interested in is to track and measure the performance of your various social media accounts. This requires that you keep a close look on your site's Google Analytics, which shows you which of your blog posts are the most popular. You can also use the social media platform analytics tool to track which posts garnered the most engagement.

SEARCH ENGINE MARKETING



Upendra Srivastava, Digital Marketing Specialist

In 2012, search engines made considerable efforts to clean up search results with the aim of providing the best quality result set. Various algorithm updates (especially Penguin and EMD) took the internet marketing world by storm. Search engines began penalizing websites ridden with duplicate or thin content or that offered no real added value to visitors. This forced everyone to begin recognizing the importance of the quality and value of meaningful content and natural back-linking”

Here is our take on the major search engine marketing verticals what we foresee as trends in 2013:

1. The past year has been about the downfall of inorganic back linking and rises of link earning (or organic backlink) by meeting the audience needs. In 2013, we expect that organic backlinks will be the main focus among Internet marketers.

2. In 2012, major search engines formally announced the correlation between social signal and search engine ranking. In 2013, we expect its significance to increase significantly.

3. People have been preaching “content is king” for seemingly forever, but it has only been in the last couple of months that the digital maxim has gained widespread attention (partly due to the infamous Panda and Penguin updates). In 2013, higher ed institutions will be taking a much more strategic-approach to content creation and acquisition.

2012 has been a year of shift in focus from quantity to quality with special emphasis placed on building a loyal audience base. The fast-paced digital marketing world is evolving and demands that we develop and create more effective, efficient, and grounded marketing strategies. As technology and digital marketing continue to reinvent themselves, new answers will continue to appear.

Here are the SEM blog posts our readers enjoyed most:

- How to Use a Long-Tail Keyword Strategy in PPC and SEO to Promote Your College’s Priority Programs
- SEO vs. PPC in Higher Education Marketing: Where’s Your Spend?

How to Use a Long-Tail Keyword Strategy in PPC and SEO to Promote Your College's Priority Programs

It is common for small to mid-size college's that offer really excellent programs to struggle as they compete against larger colleges' in an attempt to reach prospective student audiences online. There's never a lot of marketing budget to invest in one single program and the sheer momentum of a larger competitor's website, SEO, PPC and social media activities can easily overwhelm your program's rankings, leaving you with minimal traffic, low leads and even fewer registrations.

So what can you do to raise your program's rankings and get your fair share of traffic, leads and students without investing a fortune?

One effective strategy is to invest your time and money into "the long-tail of search", specifically developing long-tail keyword tactics with PPC campaigns and SEO for your priority program.

Let's start by defining exactly what a long-tail keyword phrase is in search engine marketing by having a look at this image:

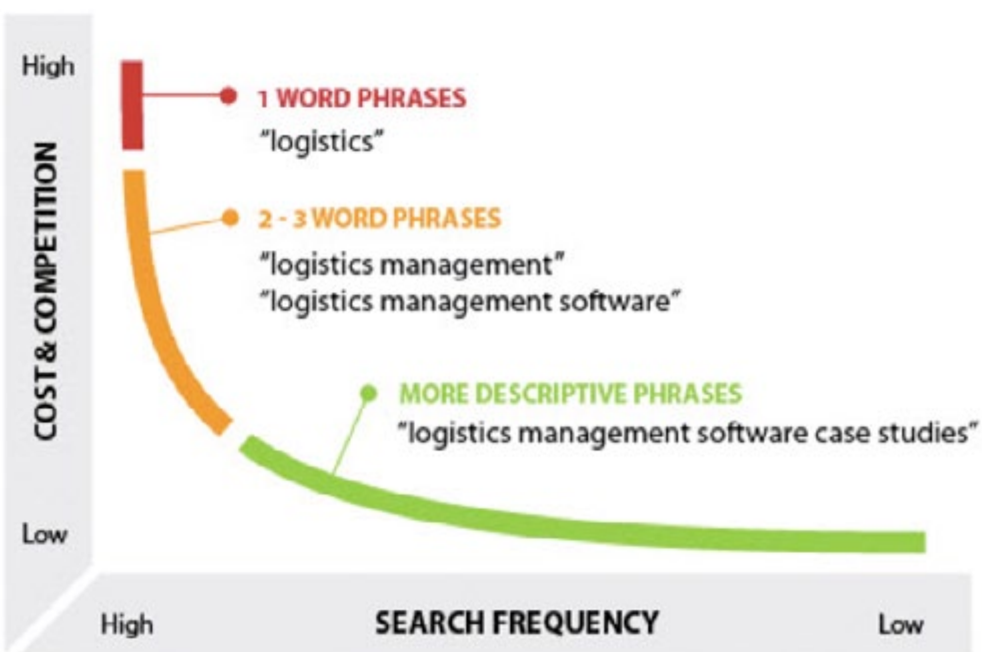


Photo Credit: C 2007 Elliance, inc

In this example "logistics management software case studies" is a long-tail keyword phrase, occurring on the green section of the curve. The position on the curve indicates it has low cost and medium search frequency. The farther to the right a term appears the further out on the "long-tail" it moves, having lower cost per click and lower search frequency.

The table below will also help look at things differently. The bottom row of this table represents a long-tail keyword phrase. The competition for keywords in the MBA market is quite fierce so you don't get quite the same curve on the CPC but your get the idea.

Keyword	Competition	Global Monthly Searches	Local Monthly Searches	Approximate CPC
mba programs	high	246,000	246,000	$18.60
executive mba program	high	18,100	18,100	$14.83
top executive mba program	high	2,900	2,900	$14.91
top executive marketing mba program	high	-	-	-

(This example was created using Google's Keyword Research Tool. It also demonstrates the biggest problem with the tool which is that once the search volume drops to too low a level it no longer reports any of the data.)

As your keyword phrase gets longer and more specific, the phrase's total search frequency drops, along with it the competition for that phrase and the approximate cost per click.

So if the searches are so scarce and the numbers are so low, why should you pursue them? Well, firstly because not many others are targeting them so they're generally more cost effective to acquire, (and remember you have very little money to promote this specific program). Secondly, because these searches align more closely with your program they generally turn out to be higher quality prospects and convert at a much higher rate than the average.

If we can agree that these are people that we would like to have visit our site how do we improve the odds that we are seen by them and that we hopefully get clicked on? So how do we apply this in PPC and SEO?

PPC & LONG-TAIL KEYWORDS

As you know, pay per click ads are targeted at specific keyword phrases. You identify the keywords in your campaign settings and control which keyword searches see your ad. As you can see in the example above, the main variables affecting PPC campaigns are specificity of keyword phrase, the volume of searches and cost per click (CPC). Long-tail keywords target traffic of well-aligned searchers, that are generally of lower CPC, and that will generally convert at a higher rate.

So that sounds great but if that is the case why isn't everyone doing this? Well, the problem is related to volume of search queries. Because of the very low search volume on these terms, most people skip over them and concentrate on ones with higher volume, which are easier to manage, can get a 2 or 3% conversion rate and be happy with that. It's more work to run a long-tail campaign because to make it successful you need to research and find many more long-tail phrases to get your volume up to a level where it starts to produce a reasonable number of conversions. Yes, it converts at a higher rate (say approximately 4-6%) but you still need a large number of searches to make the numbers work.So the key to this strategy is that you must research, identify and pull together hundreds of long-tail keyword phrases, drop them together into a campaign, monitor, maintain, cull and add new ones on an ongoing basis, to get a really great result. This takes time and patience but in the end you will have created a PPC campaign that will tap the best keyword phrases available for your program, at the lowest cost and with the highest conversion rates.

So how do you go about identifying long-tail keyword phrases that might work for you? Here are a few strategies and sources to get you started:

- Start with your Adwords Search Query Report for any general campaigns you are running, identify and pull out the long-tail keyword terms.
- Use the AdWords Keyword Tool and research keyword volume and costs
- Add qualifying terms (i.e. part-time, full-time, online) to your keyword phrases
- Add a localizing terms (i.e. Toronto, Chicago) to your keyword phrases
- Identify keywords being used by your competitors and incorporate them into your keyword phrases
- Check your traffic reports in Google Analytics for new keywords
- Check your internal site search for new keywords

Because the Cost per Click on your long-tail keywords is generally low you can quite economically develop a campaign that you grow over a period of time that will become a valuable lead generation asset for your ongoing recruitment needs. It will take time and energy but the results can be well worth it.

THE ORGANIC SEARCH SIDE OF LONG-TAIL-KEYWORDS

As you know the search engines rank your pages highly if your content is of high quality and if it closely matches the search intent of the searcher. So how do you get your priority program to rank highly? It is not going to happen if you just produce a couple of static pages and wait for searches to find them, especially, if your main competitors at the big colleges down the street are doing even an basic job with their competing pages. To set yourself apart you must have a strategy to develop long-tail, keyword rich pages around the central topics of your priority program so that it won't be overshadowed by your competition. So how do you do that?

The answer is fairly simple but again not necessarily easy to implement. You must incorporate content on your site that uses these long-tail keyword phrases. You must blog about it, publish questions and answers about it, or include a forum about it. You must generate lively, engaged discussion about your program topics and the long-tail keywords you are seeking will end up on these pages. As your content grows and improves, your organic ranking for these long-tail keywords will naturally improve. But certainly don't leave things to chance.

Now take what you've learned from the keyword research you did to put your long-tail PPC campaign together and start to incorporate those keywords into more content on your site. The aggregate effect of this "organic" engagement with your audience, along with your use of targeted keywords gleaned from your PPC campaign experience, will position yourself highly for the long-tail terms you have prioritized.

SEO vs. PPC in Higher Education Marketing: Where's Your Spend?

As colleges and universities move more budget into online recruitment marketing, the question of how to best allocate and balance those activities inevitably comes up for debate.

- Should we invest more into keyword research, on-page optimization and high quality content production to drive organic rankings?
- Should we launch new PPC campaigns to produce leads and drive registrations?
- Should we invest in more social media as a priority to attract and communicate with more prospect students?

The answers to these questions, of course, are that it depends.

Here are a few general guidelines and suggestions that can help guide your thinking on how to best proceed.

Organic search results get the vast majority of clicks

Reports vary a bit on the exact numbers but I think it is safe to say that approximately 70-80% of searches result in a click on a page's organic search results. Approximately 20-30 % of searches result in a click on a page's PPC ads depending on the keywords. Navigational searches account for some of this difference but it is very clear that the vast majority of people prefer to click on the organic results of their searches. In my mind, this argues very clearly that the first thing that you must prioritize in your online marketing is to get your SEO house in order, and get your fair share of that 70+ % of clicks on organic search results. This is even more important for branded searches. In a recent study out of the UK, it was reported that 80% of people clicked on the number 1 search result for branded searches, (i.e. a search which would include your institution's "brand" name). This is low hanging fruit that your pages must be optimized for.

If your SEO baseline activity does not give you at least top 3 position for your predefined major and minor keywords, and number 1 position for branded keywords, spend your money on SEO to get there A.S.A.P. If you really want to dominate in SEO, also invest in long tail keyword optimization for all pages to ensure that you are getting the lion's share of traffic from the higher click rate, organic visitor. Building your organic rankings takes time, expertise and hard work but once established, (and of course maintained), these high rankings will give you a big competitive advantage over your less SEO-committed competition.

PPC campaigns deliver timely, highly targeted tactical marketing messages to high priority, prospect segments.

Pay per click campaigns are great tools for tactical marketing, particularly in the short term. If you need to introduce a new program, promote an event or launch a new recruitment campaign, PPC is an excellent vehicle to get it on to key search term pages, immediately. If new competition is affecting your previously good results and you need to quickly increase leads and registrations for a particular poorly registered program, PPC ads can help get you there.

Longer term PPC campaigns are often used in highly competitive markets, i.e. online MBAs, to maintain a high profile for your institution and program in a rapidly evolving and competitive online marketplace.

Because of its flexibility, PPC lends itself particularly well to ongoing testing and Conversion Rate Optimization (CRO) practices. PPC ads and landing pages are best regarded as works in progress, with A/B and multivariable testing methods applied to them in an effort to continuously improve their conversion stats and Return on Investment. If you decide to make the marketing investment in PPC campaigns, also make a commitment to ongoing testing, analytics and ROI analysis for best results.

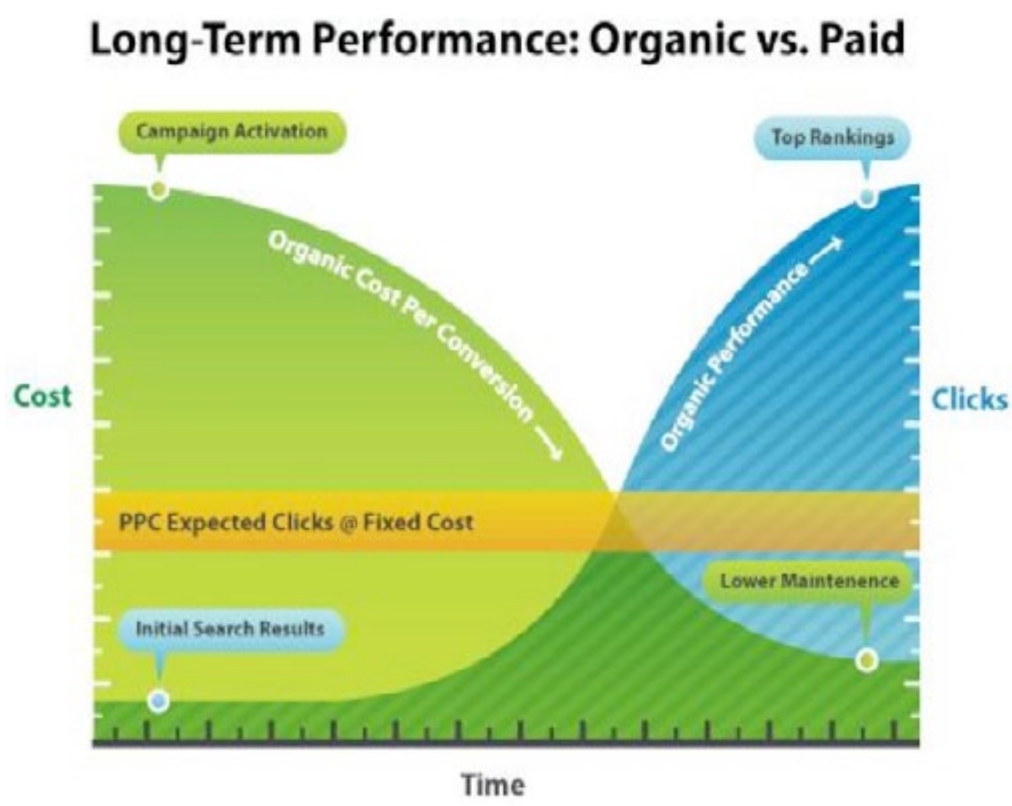


Image Source – www.seolair.com

Organic leads, (SEO generated), and PPC leads are of different quality and will "convert to student" at different rates.

Leads that come from different sources (i.e. PPC or SEO) are of different "quality". Generally speaking, organic leads convert at a higher rate than PPC leads. You need to determine what type of leads you want and in what volume you want them based on your recruitment infrastructure and on the rate at which your team can manage and effectively convert those leads to students. Manage your lead expectations carefully to make sure that you get the results you want. Ideally, measure your SEO and PPC ROI with a cost per registration metric that you can compare, contrast and then apply to your future decisions on marketing investment in these strategies.

Investing in SEO for your website and PPC advertising to generate traffic, leads and registrations are, at the end of the day, complimentary, rather than competing strategies. Finding the optimal balance to meet your school's needs is the challenge.

SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING

Noelle Visani, Social Media Marketing Strategist

If content is king, then social content will be God. Any content that is not social (easy to share) or mobile-friendly will lose a serious competitive edge. As colleges and universities are striving to broadcast more blog posts, videos, and social media content on relevant platforms, they will also feel the need for a tighter social media plan.

Facebook will certainly continue to dominate for colleges and universities in 2013, but the boredom felt for years now over the “social media treadmill” will push colleges and universities to remain relevant by looking into the international and niche social media platforms that are now developing.

Digital marketing in 2013 will certainly see a continuous emphasis on visuals. With the growth of Pinterest in 2011 and Instagram in 2012, colleges and universities will need to continue to create and foster communities around easily sharable and highly visual content.

What am I most curious to see in 2013? The evolution of social advertising and its real influence on colleges’ ROI and the communities we create. Also, of course, what will happen to Google+? …Only time will tell.

For now, let’s check out our social media blog posts that most interested you:

- How to Get Your School Started on LinkedIn
- 5 Daily Habits to Increase Your Students’ Engagement on Facebook

How to Get Your School Started on LinkedIn

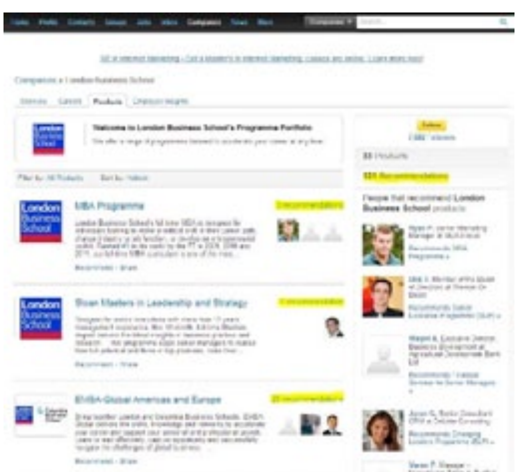
If your school is committed to helping its students find work upon graduation (which is the case of most schools) or providing them with a professional network, it needs to develop a presence on LinkedIn. This helps build your school's credibility to your students and community and will help you stay connected with your school's audiences. Here are 4 steps to get your school started on LinkedIn.

1. Create a company page for your school

- If you do not have a personal LinkedIn account, create one and complete it.
- Indeed, you will need to have a profile that is at least 50% completed, have connections, and provide a company email address in order to add a company page.
- Beware: make sure you become a Designated Administrator of the page. Go in Companies, pick your school's page, and go to Edit. If you wish to assign other individuals user profiles as admins, add their names to yours. Not designating an admin allows anyone with email addresses from the company to update the page.

2. Optimize your school's LinkedIn profile

- For maximum SEO benefits, make sure you include your school's keywords early in the descriptions of the Company.
- Use the Products and Services section: This part is often overlooked as schools feel that programs are neither products nor services. But they are both! This tab offers a recommendation section, which means that students and graduates can recommend your programs, and prospects visiting this page will see who in their network is recommending your programs. Here is what the London Business School does:



- Embed a YouTube video either on the Overview page or on each of the individual Products & Services pages you create. It is as simple as copying and pasting a URL from YouTube and it will help make your page personable.

- Use the Career section: even if you are not looking to recruit, this section will give visitors information about the school's culture.

- Other LinkedIn page optimization tricks

3. Continuously build your LinkedIn community

- Include your company page link in all your school's corporate communications: newsletters, emails, etc.

- Ask for every employee at your school to follow your school page.

- Create a LinkedIn follow button directly on your website for people to follow the page directly.

- As with any social media platform, you need to feed your profile with relevant information on a regular basis:
    - Connect your school's blog RSSS feed. To add your blog's RSS feed to your LinkedIn page, click the dropdown menu next to Admin Tools for your page's 'Overview' tab, scroll to the bottom of the page, and enter your blog's RSS feed.
    - Put any content that may be relevant to your followers in the Company status update feature. This feature will allow your content to be liked, commented, and shared in a status update that will appear on your followers' feeds.
    - Follow companies that are good resources about your industry: partners, employers, community organizations. If you've searched and found a business/ organization, you can follow them by simply click on the "Follow Company".
    - Use LinkedIn today to keep track of your school's main industry news

- Keep at it at least once a week. Progress will be incremental.

4. Track your progress with LinkedIn Insights

YouTube is continuously updating its Insights section. The Analytics tab is only visible to administrators of your Company Page. LinkedIn Analytics is one of many social media analytics tools available to help you track the effects of your LinkedIn efforts: new followers, page views, sections visited. It will also help you tweak your content on LinkedIn by tracking which posts or content received the most clicks. One of the most interesting features is the Follower Insights: you can find out exactly who follow you and gives you an estimate of people's background. It will also tell you how many Likes, Comments and Clicks your profile got. Make sure you keep in touch with your followers and see what groups they follow, what they are interested in, etc. to get to know them better.

5 Daily Habits to Increase Your Students' Engagement on Facebook

Facebook has been making changes to what your fans can see of your updates and you wish there were a few simple steps you could take daily to maintain or increase engagement with your students on Facebook? Here are 5 daily habits for that:

1. Update your profile with content that is relevant to your students, not to your school

Your Facebook page is a marketing tool but it is first and foremost meant to help your students. Be it for entertainment, for the latest news about campus or the community, your students come back to your page and interact with it because it offers them relevant information they are interested in.

- Actively research and create fresh content : Use a reader to centralize all the news and blogs from key sources in your community or industries your students are interested in. Do not rely on Facebook only. Twitter is a great platform to discover leaders and hear about new trends.
- Create your own original content to be relayed in social media: a video tutorial about how to apply for a program, a blog post about research going on at your school, a video calendar about activities to come, an infographic about one of the careers for which they are prepare, all are great content ideas.
- Create a content calendar to help you manage all the content to be shared on Facebook. Dedicate specific days for research and brainstorm and other days for creating content. You can use this Social Media Strategy Worksheet to guide you.

2. Make your content easy to share

Make sure your content is visual, and makes sure the visual always conveys the feeling of your piece to engage students and trigger them to share:

- Tap on the fun:
    - Post posters for events for students to like and share
    - Post pictures of events and ask students to tag themselves
    - Share content that is funny and ask students to find a title
    - Have a picture-based content

- Tap on the pride: if your students are proud of your message, they will be more likely to share.
    - Feature what is going on at your school: maybe some research a teacher is doing, a project a student is involved in, etc.
    - Create contests to encourage students to share their experience at your school
    - Highlight your students' and faculty successes on and off campus.
- Simply ask your students to share: Ask them to share your content or ask them for their opinion. From our experience, text posts tend to do better on Facebook. These posts are especially useful if they focus on the common experience of students: snowstorm, study week, holiday, weekend, etc.

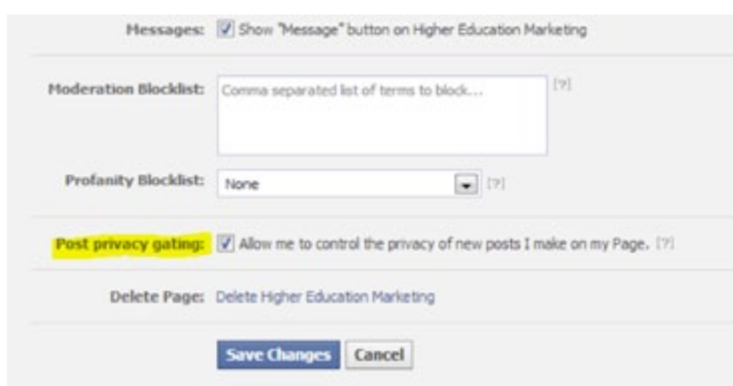
3. Share at peak times

- Make sure your content reaches your students when they are most active on Facebook. Many social media management tools (Hootsuite, Sprout Social, etc.) now integrate an Autoschedule feature that computes the best time to post for your audience. Try them and see what times they are usually posted. Once you are aware of the times they are most active, try to post some of your content manually for best results on Facebook.
- Remember that peak times may not be the peak activity times for your school: your students also spend time on Facebook on weekends. Why not try and share some content on the weekend as well and see what type of response you receive?

4. Test the New Facebook Engagement Features

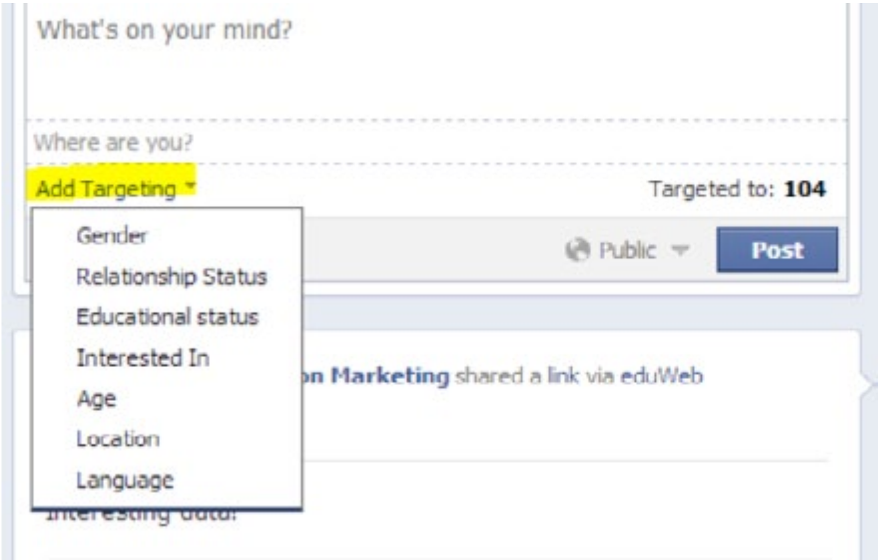
In an effort to customize the information each and every member receives, Facebook is continuously making changes to how fans receive info. There are now features almost every day. We recommend that you test these new features as they roll out to determine what works for your school. Recent features include:

- If your page has fewer than 5,000 fans, you can target some of your posts to a specific part of your student audience to engage with them only: Edit Page > Manage Permissions > Post privacy gating.



Once you will be posting, it will allow you to choose who will receive your posts:

- Let students know about these new features and invite them to try them out: for instance, ask students to add your page to an Interest List and see how it impacts your engagement. Keep building your school's community by talking about your own interest lists or mentioning pages you have come across that may be of use to them.
- Ask your students to use the new Pages Feed feature to have direct access to updates from pages they liked.



5. Keep an eye your Facebook Insights

Facebook Insights offers data that will help you determine which of your efforts are paying off.

- Look for the number of
    - New Fans
    - Fan growth from prior week
    - Unlikes
    - Weekly Activity
    - Activity growth from prior week
- You can also use info directly from EdgeRank, the algorithm Facebook uses.

WEB DESIGN

Philippe Taza, CEO - Digital Analyst

2012 was an incredible year for web development, particularly because there was an increasing focus on usability and management. More than ever, a great website is being characterized not only by aesthetics, but also by function and analytics.

These elements are emphasized through the partnership with OmniUpdate, which we established in 2012. Combining our analytics-driven services with OmniUpdate's content management expertise ensures that both our clients will be able to develop websites that not only look great, but that also perform and are easy to maintain.

Our partnership with OmniUpdate also speaks to the topics that interested our readers most in 2012, namely, understanding when and how to update their website. What we stressed most is for colleges and universities to aim for quality. From brand identity landscapes to website creation and content management, quality Website Design and Development ensures an engaging, user-friendly site that is also manageable and optimized.

This discussion on quality will certainly continue in 2013, and will include design that considers each end user, not only by persona (student prospect lead, student, alumni, etc.), but by device as well. Mobile websites are garnering a growing share of overall site structure and implementation for colleges and universities. As more colleges and universities are adopting responsive web design practices and seeing its benefits, people in higher ed are jumping into the conversation. What is RWD? What can it do for your school? What does RWD involve? Is it always the best solution?

With design increasingly being understood as a gateway to usability and ROI, we expect there to be a huge focus on streamlining design with content creation and management, rather than the two being distinct processes.

Here are the posts that our readers really enjoyed:

- Managing Website Life-Cycle in Higher Education: Are You Typical?
- 9 Triggers for a Higher Ed Website Redesign

Managing Website Life-Cycle in Higher Education: Are You Typical?

In the process of doing our business we conduct a lot of website audits for colleges and universities. In an audit we look at many things including, a school's search rankings, web analytics, technical site configuration, social media integration, SEO, SEM, design, usability, etc. In these discussions with a site's managers, we provide feedback to them on their site versus an ideal standard of "best practices" in higher ed marketing and versus their competition.

These conversations lead down many paths, depending on the school's most immediate marketing priorities but often the question comes up,

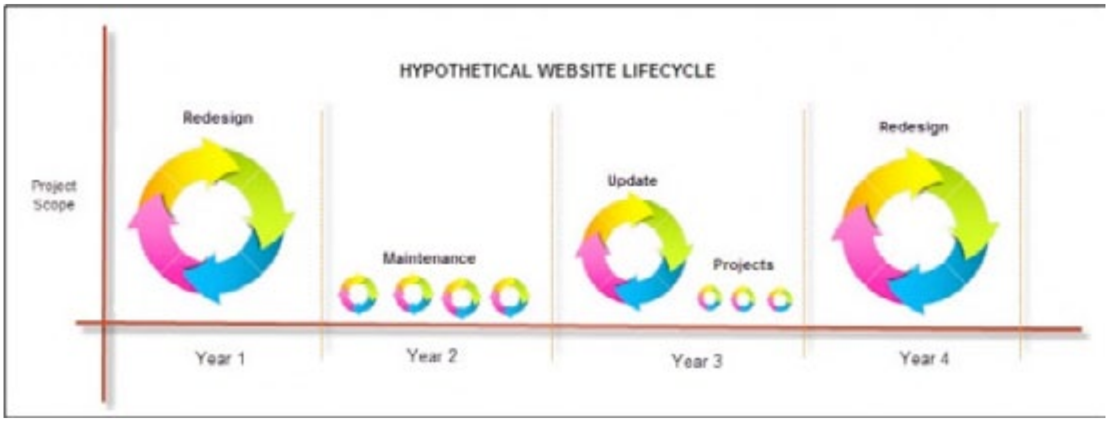
"Do you think we should redesign our site?"

This is challenging question whose answer is dependent on many specific local factors and where their site is in its "life-cycle". To get better at answering this question we have spent quite a bit of time thinking about what is most important across the "life-cycle" of a successful higher education website and how to help our clients create it.

A first, and maybe most important observation on this is that there really is no such thing as a "typical" life-cycle. Over the last few years we have seen the full gamut from those that have done complete redesigns 3 years in a row, to those who are perfectly satisfied (and successful), incrementally tweaking their site for 5 years in a row, before redesigning. Local factors as wide ranging as crashing KPIs, a rebranding exercise, a new college president, a move to a new CMS, etc., can all motivate a redesign and immediately redefine your site's life-cycle. In fact, it seems most prudent to expect the likelihood of unpredictable and changing life-cycle "conditions" like these and manage your website accordingly.

So if this variability is the norm, how do you manage across a website's life-cycle.

Here's an example of what I would describe as a fairly typical website life-cycle. It includes ongoing regular content maintenance and new special projects throughout the full cycle, and a major update in year three, bringing the site around to a redesign in year four.



Using this example, it is my argument that it is not managing to the four year life-cycle that's most important, rather it is the common strategy and process you use along the way to manage your site, through each stage, that will define the overall success of the site at any given point. Clearly you need to have a long term plan for the site to project your activities and resources into the future but given the uncertainly of longer term planning in the higher ed environment it is equally or even more critical to ensure your success at each stage.

The model above suggests a common cyclical strategy and process to plan, build, maintain, improve and manage the website (or website component), through each of the stages (and or projects) of its life-cycle.

By breaking down the life-cycle of your site into these iterative cycles and processes you can more effectively manage your website through your long term plan as well as through a wide range of changing local factors.

Here's more detail of some of the suggested individual components of each major step in the cycle.

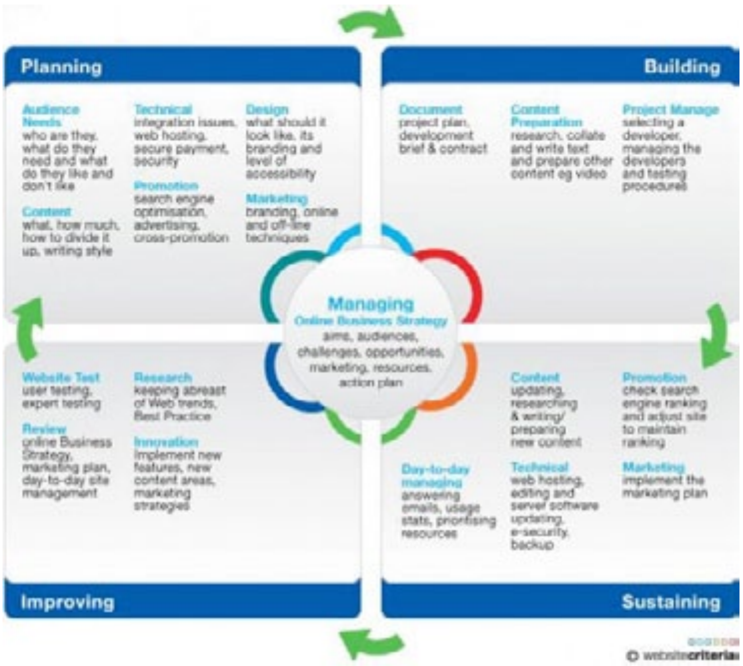


Photo Source: Websitecriteria

The individual components of each stage provide an outline of the elements you need to attend to as you manage your site through successive iterations of revision, updating and redesign. It can be used at the high level to guide your redesign or at a very granular level to manage the development and implementation of a special web project.

9 Triggers for a Higher Ed Website Redesign

The decision to move ahead with a redesign of your higher ed website is a big one. In terms of the time, money and human resource demands within a college or university web/marketing department, it's one of the single most important marketing decisions that you make.

Whether you plan to have your team do all the work internally or to go to RFP and outsource the whole project, the demands of a redesign may very well dominate your time and energy, from the day you decide to proceed until the day it's finally re-launched.

So how do schools decide to take that fateful leap forward and redesign their website?

Clearly each school has its own unique circumstances and answer to this question. Budget, human resources, larger marketing and communications issues, etc., will all play some part. But what we have noted, from working with many clients, is that there is a set of fairly common triggers that will often push a redesign to proceed.

So if you're currently considering a redesign but aren't completely sure if the time is right to proceed, here's our list of nine common reasons that trigger a website redesign that you can compare against your circumstances. Hope it helps!

1. Your key performance metrics are down

If we are being business minded about this, (and you really should be being business minded!), then your KPIs, (Key Performance Indicators), are the most important drivers of your website and your business decisions for it. If you've set up analytics to track goals for these KPIs then you will know when traffic, engagement, conversions and any other key metrics are slipping. So dig in deep into your analytics and [closely examine your KPIs]and customer's behavior to inform your decision making.

2. Your site looks old and out of touch

Higher education website design is subject to design trends, just like any other element of our popular culture. These trends, (say for example, interactive video tours), may not seem that critical to you but remember, prospective students will drop you like a hot potato if they feel they can't relate to your website. You don't have to have all the latest and greatest elements but the site can't look dated and out of touch. Nothing will kill your prospects faster than this. If this is the case redesign, starting today.

3. Your biggest competitor just launched a great new site

Trying to keep up with the Joneses is never a great strategy for managing your business but in today's competitive marketplace for students you do need to be well tuned into what your main competitors are doing. If you carefully audit your competitor's sites on a regular basis, you can keep up to them, through gradual improvements and updated and new content. If you don't take this preventative approach, odds are that you will end up in serious website trouble, once every three or four years. If your competitor's new site is light years ahead of yours, you don't really have much choice – redesign!

4. Your competitors are seriously outranking you

Your rankings on search engines for branded, (including your institutions name) and non-branded keywords are ultimately what drive organic traffic to your website. Your keyword rankings are determined by on-page (i.e. on your website) and off-page (i.e. inbound link and authority) factors that the search engines use to match your site's content to an individual's "search intent." Your "new content strategy" for your site is also a very important contributor to your rankings.

If you have been limping along for years without keeping up with current SEO standards and don't have a content strategy, it may be best to talk to an expert and get started. You may or may not need a redesign, but you definitely need some help.

5. Your update to-do list is as long as your arm

Regardless of how proactive you have been, trying to keep up with design, content and competitive trends, there comes a certain point when " the update approach" simply becomes unmanageable and it is time to redesign from scratch. In fact, we have seen examples where it becomes more expensive trying to keep an out of date architecture/design/content up-to-date than it is to redevelop the site. Be sensitive to this tipping point by keeping track of your development time and budget versus changes implemented. A Content Management System (CMS) that will push out a responsive web design may be in your future.

6. Technically, your website is out of date

Web technology and associated new functionality is a rapidly moving target. Obviously, many new technologies can be added into an existing site but at some point you need to recognize when jury rigging new elements, for example, an automated attendant, news modules or the latest plugins into an existing design becomes a problem. System speed and dependability are related performance factors that need to be maintained over time. Server speed is one of those things that may drop over time because of piecemeal updates and add-on apps. This drop can have a dramatic effect on bounce rates of new visitors and dramatically reduce the quality of the visitor experience of those who stick around to explore.

7. Your business has changed

In recent years, the business of higher education has (and will likely continue), to change at breakneck pace, as factors ranging from technology-based learning, changing funding formulas, legislative restrictions, to free MOOCs , etc., all impact on your institution's business strategy, messaging and academic offerings to students. New types of business models, programs, courses and new kinds of relationships with students, other institutions and business will inevitably force websites to evolve. Adapt or fall behind are your only options.

8. Your branding has changed

As the business of post-secondary education changes, and as institutions reinvent themselves, so too must their branding change. As higher ed institutions embrace the new world of digital learning in a global marketplace, higher education marketing managers must reposition their institutions to capture new opportunities in the changing landscape of the broader knowledge-based digital economy. Rebranding can be phased into a website, if absolutely necessary, but this is generally self-defeating as the old brand lingers in your collateral and website, competing with and confusing the new brand for some time. If there was ever a good reason to update your site, rebranding is it.

9. The HIPPO (Highest Paid Person in the Office) said so

As often as the logic of analysis, planning and Darwinian market forces prompt a redesign, so too, will seemingly independent decisions coming from the corner office. Use this decision as an opportunity to showcase your higher ed market expertise and digital marketing skills to produce a more effective and more competitive site.

ABOUT HIGHER EDUCATION MARKETING

Higher Education Marketing provides digital marketing services to the higher education marketplace. We use an analytics-driven marketing approach to provide colleges and universities with a comprehensive suite of integrated marketing and communications services, including Google Analytics; Search Engine Optimization (SEO); Pay per Click (PPC) Marketing; Social Media Marketing; Web Design and Development; and Content Management and Strategy.

Our experience in the post-secondary education marketplace allows HEM to bring a deep understanding of the objectives and requirements to the lead generation, recruitment and general marketing needs of our clients. Our expertise in analytics and digital marketing provides our clients with cutting-edge technical and tactical online marketing strategy and solutions.

Contact us for more information:

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