TRENDS SNAPSHOT

Digital-Marketing Trends in Higher Education



- Integrating teams, unifying messages
- The hybrid future
- Making the virtual tour real
- Upgrading the basics
- Healthy skepticism helps

In early 2020, college enrollment managers were suddenly deprived of their most treasured tools. Gone were college fairs, visits to high schools, and in-person campus tours.

Before the pandemic, digital marketing was used to identify interested students; encourage students to sign up for a visit, or make a tuition deposit. But suddenly online marketing carried the full burden of moving prospective students from early interest in an institution to showing up in the classroom.

The digital-marketing quest to enroll students has been fighting strong headwinds. The fall-2021 freshman class shrunk 9.2 percent compared to the fall of 2019, according to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.

Against this difficult backdrop, and debate about the value of a college degree, some institutions are thriving. Top-ranked prestigious universities are drowning in applicants. For those institutions not sitting comfortably on ivy-entwined historic brands, the fight for applicants has been harder and agility has been vital.

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THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION®



Brian Kibby
Chief Executive Officer at Modern Campus

A Letter from Brian Kibby, CEO at Modern Campus

THE HIGHER ED WEBSITE IN THE ERA OF SAME DAY EVERYTHING

We live in a hyper personalized, Netflix, Uber, and Door Dash everything world – a universe of Amazon like same-day everything.

All businesses—and especially colleges and universities—must leverage hyper personalization to remain competitive, to grow, and to deliver on their mission within their communities.

OUR REALITIES: UNDERSTANDING RECENT TRENDS

Traditional degree enrollment has been falling since 2011. The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center reported that Fall 2021 saw the largest two-year enrollment decline in 50 years—with nearly 1 million fewer students than there were in Fall 2019.

No institution is immune. Since 2016, 71 colleges have closed or merged, including for-profits, publics and privates alike.

What's more, the people who are enrolling in postsecondary programs aren't finishing. Over 40% of students won't finish their degree. And they have the student loans to prove it.

We all know the higher education model needs modernization—hyper personalization and customer obsession for the learner provides us with the roadmap.

POSITIONING INSTITUTIONS FOR THE REALITIES OF THE MODERN WORLD

The fact is that modern colleges and universities stand at a critical crossroads.

Down one path is hyper personalization and same day everything. Down the other path is the status quo—and in a hyper competitive environment with declining enrollment, that is a losing hand. In many ways, hyper personalization starts with the website because for many learners—that's their first true interaction with the campus.

It's critical to find ways to personalize the digital experience, and to link the course catalog with the website so students can easily navigate to the courses and programs that are right for them.

What's more, higher education institutions should embed real-time labor market data on those program pages so students can easily understand the ROI.

These are hallmarks of the modern digital consumer experience. It's becoming standard practice in a wide range of diverse, customer-facing industries.

And in higher education, capitalizing on this change provides us a clear roadmap to lifelong impact!



Many institutions are moving marketing dollars around based on quarterly, monthly, or even weekly reviews of what's working.

Amid the uncertainty, a few basic themes emerge: Collaboration among college departments and synchronization of messaging is key. A highly coordinated, hybrid blend of digital, print, and in-person and virtual events is considered the way forward in university marketing. Virtual tours are growing in variety and sophistication. Audits and continuous upgrades of basic digital tools, such as email campaigns and websites, remain essential.

> **"Some of what we're doing is really simple, but, in the end, on every platform, what a student or a parent is seeing all sounds and looks the same. It's subtle, but in my mind, it makes a whole lot of difference."**

Integrating teams, unifying messages

One theme that emerged in digital marketing during the pandemic, managers say, has less to do with the adoption of new technology, such as TikTok, and more to do with the integration of multiple channels. Enrollment managers are making their messaging more unified and coherent. They seek to break down universities' fabled silos and build universitywide teams.

Reflecting on pandemic-driven change, Tony Dobies, senior director of marketing at West Virginia University, whose work has drawn national notice, says, "We have invested more time into what our digital communications looks like — email and websites and social media — and combining all of those together to make them really interconnected."

Integration of the work of undergraduate-admissions marketing, the central university communications team, and any marketing staff at graduate schools is the ultimate goal, many university digital-marketing leaders say. In a competitive environment, a university that competes with itself hobbles its ability to enroll students.

When themes and details are consistent, marketing has more impact, says Dobies. A photo used in email might also be leveraged in social media. "Some of what we're doing is really simple," he says, "but, in the end, on every platform, what a student or a parent is seeing all sounds and looks the same. It's subtle, but in my mind, it makes a whole lot of difference."

The hybrid future

The strategy of using multiple threads of communication to weave a cohesive story can serve institutional diversity goals. The University of Florida, for example, wants to attract more students of color and low-income, first-generation students. Its messaging for all students is focused on three themes — affordability, a supportive college community, and graduation with strong outcomes, such as good starting salaries.

Although some marketers might think that first-generation students could not be easily reached online, the University of Florida found otherwise. It targeted the students digitally, driving them to a microsite with videos made by current students. With some of the students, the university paired a postcard sent to their parents. The print-digital combination proved to be the winning strategy.

After discovering that the university was losing students to competing schools even though it was often offering a better financial-aid package, the university switched from email to a printed notification of its financial-aid offers, particularly to students of color and first-generation students. The students receive a personalized pamphlet saying, "We've got you covered," with a detailed breakdown of their financial-aid package.

Another hybrid strategy the University of Florida is pursuing is combining "yield events" — where admitted students are invited to campus to encourage them to enroll — with virtual events that give detailed information on financial aid, student-support services, and residential life.

Making the virtual tour real

Many college enrollment managers mention on-campus tours as their most important tool. "The campus visit is monumental in our ability to attract and enroll amazing students," says DJ Menifee, vice president for enrollment at Susquehanna University, in Selinsgrove, Pa.

When the pandemic struck, he says, Susquehanna did not have a strong virtual tour or a large video repository. The university moved quickly to create video, in clips of 90 seconds or less, for virtual tours, a YouTube channel, and social-media posts.

At most colleges, the virtual tour has gone beyond being a series of slides and taken on multiple personalities: interactive maps, more complex productions with 360-degree photos and augmented reality, and collections of tours on third-party platforms. A remote simulation of the in-person tour, in which a student shows potential applicants around with her or his phone and answers questions as the tour proceeds, is proving to be popular on many campuses. "So many kinds of campuses are just drop-dead gorgeous, and a single photo really just doesn't capture that," says Todd Rinehart, vice chancellor for enrollment at the University of Denver.

Upgrading the basics

Amid the glitter of new tools and strategies, enrollment managers say legacy approaches such as websites and email campaigns have not lost their luster. Their importance is underscored by surveys of admitted students about what influenced them to apply. At West Virginia, that research reveals that "email is the most effective direct way to reach and get somebody to take an action," says Dobies.

The enrollment team at West Virginia works with the central marketing team to configure the university website with prospective students in mind. Even departmental pages, he says, "are built with the idea that somebody's probably going to come to them from a Google search about a major they want to get into."

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QR codes are surging in popularity as a way to steer students to university websites. When QR codes were invented in 1994, smartphones didn't exist. As recently as 2015, the publication TechCrunch called QR codes a "laughingstock."

But during the pandemic, the heavy use of QR codes to connect to restaurant menus drove up consumer comfort with them. They began to live up to their original name — quick response codes. In the university context, they can quickly drive students from print materials to web pages.

Chatbots are another relatively new feature of university websites gaining popularity. "Students are up at 10:30 at night looking at the website and asking questions," says Mary G. Parker, vice president for enrollment management at the University of Florida. "We don't want them to have to wait until the next morning to get an answer."

Some institutions credit chatbots with reducing staff members' workload by providing scripted answers to repetitive questions. But they have risks.

Chatbots can deliver flawed answers or be stumped by simple questions, frustrating students. A test run of some basic questions, such as, "What is the deadline for applying to your university?" got an, "I don't understand your question," or unrelated links from several university chatbots. Another chatbot sends students to appropriate links, but they are logged out of the chatbot and have to log back in to ask another question. In short, chatbots do not always deliver a great user experience.

Sixty-eight percent of respondents to a June 2021 poll by Educause were concerned about the ethics of using artificial intelligence, such as chatbots, at colleges. Among the ethical concerns experts have voiced about chatbots is whether they will be accessible to non-native speakers or those with language impairments.

Healthy skepticism helps

Jon Boeckenstedt, the vice provost for enrollment management at Oregon State University, is wary of the barrage of vendors offering new digital-marketing solutions. "The factors that influence student choice," he says, "look like they did 20 years ago: reputation, location, and the extent to which a university will prepare you for your chosen career."

But he adds that when he began working in enrollment, students had to write or call to get information, and colleges could control almost all the information students received.

"Now we're in control of almost nothing," he says. "Channels and sources of information are so distributed and scattered." Solo students reviewing colleges post YouTube videos, parents swap tips in online forums, and college applicants send out a barrage of social-media posts.

While Boeckenstedt isn't apt to answer anyone pitching him the latest digital fad, he acknowledges that online marketing often starts students' journey through the admissions funnel toward those events likely to convert them into applicants.

Boeckenstedt and other senior enrollment managers note that college admissions has seasons that digital marketing has to follow, from early inquiries in late summer, to fall campus visits, to the magical moment in May when most deposits are made. After that, marketing has to fight "summer melt" as some students' motivation to attend college slides.

Then in August, after a look at what has worked and what hasn't, the digital-marketing campaigns begin anew.

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