



Tue, 11/20/2012 - 12:10pm [Web Only](#)

The Future of College Recruitment

Connecting with a new generation

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It's really no surprise that today's technology-savvy generation is challenging elements of the traditional college recruitment process. The conventional approaches of marketing, recruitment and admissions are all being called into question, in part, due to two driving factors—external influences and the changing needs of today's student. This article explores these factors and offers ideas on what can be done to reach, and connect, with more students.

If it's of any comfort, the education industry isn't alone in this transformation. Think about most any other industry such as music, publishing, manufacturing, gaming, automotive, entertainment and even something we may not even think about—energy production. In a recent article, Jim Rogers, the CEO of one of the country's largest energy providers, said the U.S. utility industry will look very different in the coming years given the paradigm shift transforming the sector.

The first step in any transformation is awareness—the ability to realize the practices employed in the past may not work as well anymore. Second is flexibility, or the ability to do something differently. This concept is known as Requisite Variety. Sometimes people recognize they're not getting the desired results, but oftentimes continue to do the same thing. This is either because they have a system in place that mandates a specific approach or they simply don't have a clue what else to do in place of it.

Reasons to Change

As we examine the education industry, there are some external factors pushing for change. One reason to consider is how busy people are today compared to the past. It seems as if children are being carted from one event to another with dance classes, sporting events, community service projects or jobs. And that's just in the "real" world. They also spend considerable time in their social network worlds, gaming, and texting. In fact, today's student is exposed to 30,000 hours of digital information by the time they reach their 20s.

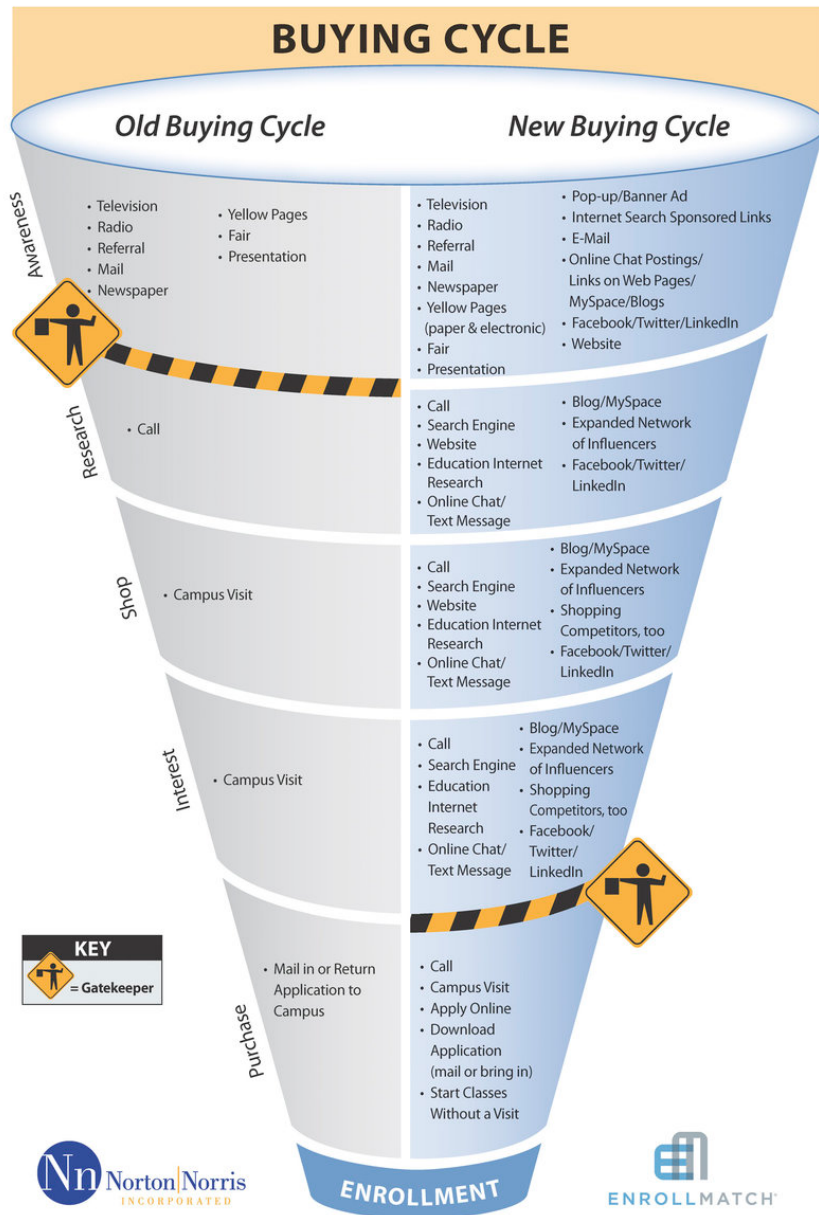
The parents of today's student are also incredibly busy with their own careers, managing blended families and elder care. These same adults may be pursuing education for their own growth and job security. They too are attached to technology 24/7 and may feel pressure to respond to work demands outside the typical workday.

Another factor influencing marketing and recruitment practices is to consider the erosion of trust in our society. Let's face it. Today's students have witnessed politicians, religious figures, sports icons, and other idols fall from grace in a very public way. In addition, they have a keen awareness when it comes to marketing and advertising. They know when they are being sold and are selective on what they allow to influence their decisions.

Let's not forget another major element impacting how college marketing and recruitment must adapt—the use of technology. The term "screenagers" is used to describe how today's teenagers are attached to screens. Think about it. They awaken to an alarm on a cellphone and then check the weather along with any texts they may have missed on the same phone before they even get out of bed. Then they go to school or work and spend more time on a computer. It doesn't end when they get home either. Today's student will interact with friends and video games via the internet and texting. A recent study also found that the amount of time American kids devote to media is equivalent to a full-time job.

Additionally, today's "screenager" tends to prefer dealing with a machine over a

human, especially in situations involving confrontation and commitment. They've incorporated social media websites such as Twitter and Facebook into their daily lifestyle. When it comes to purchasing decisions, they're conducting research online, doing online price comparisons and being exposed to social media marketing.



When examining the stages a person goes through in making a buying decision (such as selecting a major, college, or university), there is a significant misalignment with recruitment and admission practices. The steps a person goes through in making a major buying decision include: awareness (first exposure), research (more details), shopping (other options including competitors), interest (deeper response) and purchase (enrollment). Today's student may move through much of the buying cycle on their own given their access and reliance on technology.

Evidence of this process in action can be seen with the continued rise in "stealth applications" or prospective students who apply with no known previous interaction with the institution. In a 2011 University Business article, the author shows evidence from colleges across the country that students are taking control of how they want to experience the college selection process. Students are redefining how they conduct their college search process, since they are often bombarded with publications and emails from colleges. They want more control over the way they search and are resistant to traditional recruitment approaches.

Back in the “old days,” the mechanisms used in marketing to create awareness were limited to school visits, direct mail, referrals, billboards, etc. (see Figure 1). When looking at how today’s student gets information, one can easily see how the sources have expanded to include social networking sites, internet searches, and paid web advertising. These sources are also available as a prospective student continues through the buying cycle into the stages of research, shopping, and interest.

The admissions professional is no longer the gatekeeper of information in the stages of the decision making process. Technology has changed how people receive information and in fact, prospective students may know more about your college and programs than those working in the admissions office. Even more challenging is that a prospective student can opt out at any point and no one even knew they existed. So it’s not that the admission counselor role is irrelevant—it just needs to expand beyond traditional definitions.

Treating each and every prospective student as if they are in the beginning stages of a decision process when they may actually be at a different stage will only frustrate them, since their needs aren’t being met. They may also feel a sense of “being sold” if the admission professional doesn’t meet them in their buying cycle stage.

Moving Forward

Given the factors pushing for change, it is important to consider typical recruitment and admission practices and ask, “Is what I’m doing working?” If not; it’s time to show some flexibility to reach more students. Remember today’s prospective student is busy; they are cognizant of attempts to influence their decisions; and they use technology as a primary means of information gathering and decision-making.

Research shows that there will be a need to base marketing on personalization and relationships as opposed to sales pitches. This reality presents some interesting obstacles for those with limiting beliefs or “tools.” For instance, past practices centered around the concept that a prospective student had to come on campus to meet with an admissions professional before they could make a decision to enroll. The belief was that they couldn’t possibly understand the value of what they’re getting for their money without “kicking the tires.”

Perhaps it’s as simple as offering prospective students a variety of ways to form a trusting relationship and get meaningful information in the way that works best for them. Forcing them into a system that has limited options will only push away those who don’t choose to experience the process in the way you offer. In other words, you will only get the people who want to buy the way you sell.

When I served as the chief marketing and enrollment officer at a small Midwest university, we were faced with substantial budget cuts and were struggling with how to recruit students in our 100+ off-site locations across the U.S. The methods used up to that point were to fly our admission counselors all over the county to present information sessions. The belief was we had to meet them face-to-face for them to enroll. They say necessity is the mother of invention, so we had to rethink the entire process.

We offered prospective students the option to speak with an admission counselor over the phone. Our team of nine professionals enrolled students at all these locations at a program tuition cost of over \$40,000. And none of those prospects ever met the person on the other end of the phone. It simply wasn’t a requirement for them to see the person, the classrooms, or the building. They were buying the relationship and reputation our admission professionals shared virtually.

5 Key Things for Moving Forward

The successful admissions professional of the future will be able to open their mind to the reality that the world has changed and, in turn, every industry is going through an evolution to survive. It’s not that past recruitment or admission strategies are

wrong either. It's simply a question of what can be added to enhance the experience to meet the needs of today's student. From here, it's about aligning skills, training, and processes with what consumers seek.

Change is scary thing and sometimes, predictability wins out over trying something new. Moving forward, those working in college admissions will be best served by adhering to their organizational admission standards while meeting the needs of today's student. There are five key things that need to happen in admissions to move forward:

1. **Be Open to Change.** Although it is never easy to change, hopefully there's enough motivation to try something new. My guess is admission teams are ready and simply waiting on management to catch on. In fact, I've been told by some seasoned professionals that management is the one that needs convincing—not them. Their bosses happen to come from the admissions world of old and are the ones standing in the way of progress.
2. **Increase Requisite Variety.** The new admissions methodology we're suggesting isn't a one-size, fits all approach as previous approaches were. Today's students want variety and flexibility. It will take a talented and skilled admission professional to know how to best serve the needs of each individual.
3. **Develop New Knowledge and Skills.** The good news is you don't have to throw away everything from past processes either. It's more about adding new skills and knowledge to help admission professionals meet the needs of today's student and their organization at the same time. This will take a degreed professional with advanced skills and experience in communication, psychology, customer service, sales, and counseling.
4. **Rethink Performance Metrics.** As the recruitment and admissions approaches change, so do the metrics. Perhaps looking beyond application conversions to include student success and retention is a place to start.
5. **Hire for the New Paradigm.** Given the skill set necessary for success is different, so will be the person doing the job. Reexamine job descriptions and selection criteria to fit the new methodology.

Let's not forget that this technologically savvy generation is dramatically different from any other that's come before. A big opportunity lies in front of those colleges and universities that can adapt processes to meet today's student on their terms.

This article touches on a few admission practices, and yet, there are so many more. You now have the opportunity to keep dissecting current recruitment and admission practices to determine if they're working, and based on that reality, explore options to change or add new skills to what you're currently doing. The Law of Requisite Variety states that in any system, all other things being equal, the individual with the widest range of responses will control the system. In plain terms, this means that if you have more variety in your behavior (and more tools) than another person (or institution), then you can control your interactions with that person.

If that doesn't say it all, one may want to consider the words of Duke Energy CEO, Jim Rogers, when asked about standing in the way of change: "We're not going to be one of these incumbents that fights it, we're going to get ahead of it. When a parade forms on an issue you can throw your body in front of it and let them walk over you or you can jump in front of the parade and pretend it's yours."

Date: November, 2012

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