



The Career College Information Source

Improving Admissions Performance by Focusing on APPS

By Dr. Jean Norris, Norton | Norris, Inc.

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Part 1 of 4

It can be difficult to have a conversation about improving admissions and recruitment performance without first acknowledging that the job is not what it used to be. Once a highly coveted role, the professional admissions representative was “all knowing” and the source of solutions for any problem a student may encounter in their journey into college life. But increased scrutiny of the sector changed what could be said to a prospective student and by whom. Those working in admissions were suddenly scripted, recorded, videotaped, observed and placed in a fishbowl. At the same time, prospective students were already informed on key pieces of information through disclosures on the school’s website and through social media. Given this, what is the value of the admissions representative role today and how is success measured?

Admissions professionals are still necessary – just in a different way. Consider a recent online article, “Will Salespeople Be Replaced by Technology,” (Salespractice.com) in which the author states, “The Internet is just another

marketing tool or method and cannot replace the sales professional because that is not what the Internet is designed to do. It is the sales professional that can offer knowledge which is not the same as (the) Internet(s), often faulty, information.”

The admissions representative remains an essential partner in helping prospective students navigate the college decision-making process. What needs to change is the job description (and subsequent training) and the definition of effectiveness must be expanded. Up until now, the majority of admissions training has focused primarily on product knowledge and sales skills. This needs to expand and evolve to stay relevant.

We believe the four key competencies necessary for compliance AND success in today’s environment mirrors the work of Tim Connor in the book “*Soft Sell*.” These competencies include:

- Attitude
- Product Knowledge
- People Skills
- Sales Skills

Given the changing consumer, the importance, or weight, of each competency has also shifted over time. For instance, more



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Dr. Norris is the developer of EnrollMatch®, a comprehensive admissions training program offering proven results in compliance and performance. EnrollMatch® is the FIRST and ONLY admissions training program legally endorsed for alignment with accreditation and admissions related standards.

Jean is often called upon to speak at conferences, commencements, and organizational retreats. Her research, articles, and interviews can be found in many well-known publications serving the sector.

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weight was placed on product knowledge in the past because the Internet did not even exist. Today, Connor states that product knowledge only comprises 10 percent of success for today's professional sales person. He goes on to rank sales skills at 15 percent, people skills at 25 percent and attitude at 50 percent. In future articles we will explore each of these in greater detail but for now, let us take a deeper dive into the area of product knowledge.

As mentioned, today's students have high expectations and get much of their information from sources other than the people we train at our schools. This may lead to confusion and inaccuracies for which guidance is necessary. That means the successful admissions professional must know what their prospective students know and MORE! After all, they are investing their time to meet with someone who they believe is an expert.

The Basics

Any admissions training program must include standard information with regular updates regarding internal and external changes. The basics of product knowledge include:

- History of the school
- Program offerings
- Courses and descriptions
- Accreditation
- Outcomes
- Faculty backgrounds
- Disclosures
- Student life (clubs, organizations)
- Local attractions
- Resources (transportation, housing, child care)
- Financial assistance/scholarships
- Specific points of difference

Stepping It Up

To take product knowledge to the next level, admission professionals must make a dedicated effort to learn all they can about a variety of areas inside and outside the organization. This takes diligence and commitment. Advanced product knowledge includes:

1. Find out what is happening in the classroom outside the course descriptions.

One of the most effective ways to do this is by sitting in on classes. Here you have a chance to experience the content and dynamics from the student perspective. Do they have guest speakers coming to class? What field trips have they gone on? How are students applying what they are learning? What type of instruction is prevalent? Is it all lecture based or is there a hands on lab segment? How do students apply what they learn outside the classroom?

This may seem like a lot of work so consider assigning an admissions representative to a particular program. As "program liaison" they are responsible for all changes and details of their assigned program as a partner with the Dean and faculty members. In turn, they are responsible for sharing details with others in the admissions office.

2. Shadow other departments.

The challenges faced by your colleagues may go unnoticed unless you spend a day in their shoes. It may also improve accuracy of information giving. Better yet, invite career services, financial aid or faculty to shadow admissions for a day. This in turn will give them a better understanding of how difficult the admissions job has become.

3. Check out your own website and social media discussions.

In thousands of mystery shops across the country, our "prospective students" oftentimes know more about what is happening at a school than the admissions representatives do because they simply look at the school's website and read reviews. Make sure to go back and check your own website often since things tend to change quickly.

4. Visit the local community college.

In today's environment it is about helping a prospective student make a good decision – even if it is not your school. But how can you do that if you do not

understand the other options they have for education? We encourage you to scour the website and learn all you can and then tour the facility so you can give an informed response to those considering this option. You may even have one of your admission representatives enroll in a class at the local community college to experience the process firsthand.

5. Understand other educational offerings in your area.

Just as above, it is essential to understand what programs and modalities are offered at other schools in your area. Perhaps a prospective student finds a better fit with an online environment and your school does not offer this option. Imagine the prospective students surprise and satisfaction with their experience if admissions can serve as such a valuable resource.

6. Visit an externship site.

If you really want to see applied learning in action, arrange a visit to a local externship site to see your students in action. This experience also helps motivate admissions representatives when they see someone they have been working with actually excel in the work setting. These insights are also powerful examples to share with prospective students.

7. Know your audience.

Another element of product knowledge is about understanding your customer. What information is most important to them? How do they prefer to receive information? What more can be offered to them to help them with their decision? What other schools or options might they be considering? Most importantly, try and view the entire admissions experience from their perspective and make changes. Oftentimes, this adjustment can be the difference in having more students show up to your campus.

Building relationships also entails understanding what your prospective students enjoy. From popular television

shows to technology to video games to music...it is your job to find out what the popular trends are if you want an opportunity to connect with them in meaningful ways.

8. Do the “Money Walk.”

Grab your pad of paper and a pen and practice what traditional colleges and universities do. It is pretty much standard operating procedure for administration to do the “money walk.” This means walking through the entire campus (including the surrounding areas) from a student’s perspective. In other words, does the quality of the facility warrant the tuition being charged? If the flowers along the sidewalk between the admissions office and the student center were dead – they would be replanted. Old, worn carpeting would be replaced. Even toilet paper holders that were not attached securely would be marked on the list for repair. Visual first impressions cannot be resolved later. What your prospects see when they enter your building, sit in the lobby, and tour the facility are critical components in building value.

9. Find out what is happening in the higher education sector.

Keeping tabs on changing rules and regulations as well as trends in higher education (both for-profit and nonprofit) can provide great value in understanding and informing strategies. Remember, savvy prospective students are doing this too.

10. Set up your Google Alerts.

Simply enter in topics or names in which you would like a daily email including items in the news. This can be powerful information in understanding changes or trends with higher education, your school, other schools in your area, etc.

11. Read industry publications.

In the past, some managers did not focus on educating their teams on details outside their immediate area. The fear was that an admissions person would say something they should not if they knew too much.

In fact, the opposite is true. We find that when people understand the WHY behind a particular mandate or requirement it often improves compliance. It is when people do not see the value they tend to “go off the reservation.”

12. Consider joining an association for professional development.

Although there is not a dedicated organization for admission professionals at this time, there are many resources out there to learn from and expand your skills. Consider joining a state association or group focused on customer service, training and development, presentation skills, etc. Perhaps your organization is already a member of APSCU (Association of Private Sector Colleges and Universities) that provides information and training, too.

13. Get on your school’s mailing/email list.

It is also helpful to understand the marketing communications your prospective students (and even those who have not begun classes yet) receive. This information also makes it easier to start conversations by showing a unified effort in recruiting the prospective student.

14. Never stop learning.

The admissions professional of today must make a concerted effort to always be learning. Be curious about the world around you and what is changing. These changes usually have an impact on higher education and/or your students in one-way or another.

Again, it is important to remember that a weight of only 10 percent in product knowledge does not mean it is not important. It is very important to be completely proficient at a much deeper level than ever before. The changing role of the admissions professional calls for different skills and exercising new muscles that have not been used before.

Imagine the increased confidence and improved communication the admissions professional can have with prospective students and their friends/family when prepared at this level. Their motivation will be high and it will impact the other aspects of APPS (primarily Attitude and People Skills). Future articles in this series will focus on the other key competencies of APPS!