

## Improving Admissions Performance by Focusing on APPS – Part 2 of 4

Written by Dr. Jean Norris and Elizabeth Wheeler, Norton|Norris, Inc.  
September 28, 2014

You probably already realize the significant role an admissions professional plays in your organization. One only needs to ask a student about the special relationship they formed with that first person they met at your school to confirm that statement. From an operational standpoint (and recent headlines), the admissions representative can also serve as a liability if they aren't 100% compliant and effective. The question then is how to balance meaningful relationship building with compliance and ethical selling.

As previously mentioned, Connor's (2003) four key competencies for success in sales can serve us well. These include:

- Attitude
- Product Knowledge
- People Skills
- Sales Skills

As we delve further into the **APPS** acronym, this article will focus on the *Sales Skills* competency. As you may recall, *Sales Skills* comprises 15% of what is needed to be a successful admissions professional. Lest the mention of "sales" makes you nervous, consider this. Selling is simply helping one, "to develop a belief in the truth, value or desirability of" or "gain acceptance for" (Meriam-Webster). Given this, when you have a great product or service to offer and someone shows interest – selling begins. Think about it. We are all selling on a daily basis anyway whether it is promoting an idea to a supervisor; convincing others of your way of thinking on plans for the weekend or determining what to eat for dinner. The adage of "*Doing Well by Doing Good*" has long been embraced by those working in for-profit, career education. After all, every organization has to make money to pay their bills.

### **The Basics**

The specific elements of selling that are commonplace in higher education include:

- Asking meaningful questions
- Listening (without filters)
- Discovering motivation
- Discerning Fit/Need
- Uncovering obstacles
- Clarifying understanding
- Analyzing of data points

- Problem solving
- Providing resources
- Presenting information
- Facilitating decision making
- Exceptional and customized follow-up
- Asking for referrals

### **Stepping It Up**

So how can the admissions representative sell in today’s highly scrutinized society filled with skeptical prospective students? It begins with trust. A recent study showed that Millennials are more likely to trust an anonymous review online than they are willing to trust the experts (Bazaar Voice, 2012). In translation, prospective students may trust the opinion of a complete stranger over the admissions representative. Perhaps this is due to a belief that there is an agenda and/or pressure to enroll before the prospective student even meets with a person to develop trust.

This phenomenon isn’t exclusive to higher education though. We can learn from other industries to understand what they are doing to help their sales professionals.

#### **1. Develop a Code of Ethics/Sales Code of Conduct**

The sales and marketing industries created their own code of ethics to uphold a measure of integrity for their clients, and so should schools and colleges. Some college marketing and recruitment tactics have been deemed unethical and ineffective. Even in the world of non-profit higher education, some will use Skype as a strategy to contact a student since the phone number is unrecognizable (National Association for College Admission Counseling, September 2014).

As a result of universal bad practices such as these, a telephone-harassment statute was enacted. According to experts at the First Amendment Center (Tatum), telephone harassment is characterized by several unsavory practices such as calling repeatedly, anonymously, or at inconvenient hours. This is one way to give “selling” a bad name. Each state and accrediting agency specifies their statutory language, so be sure to deepen your own Product Knowledge competency to understand your state and accrediting body.

To gain further insight into this topic, we asked leaders from across the higher education sector to weigh in with their advice for best practices for admission professionals, too. Here is what they had to say:

1. Always tell the truth.

2. Understand your own beliefs and value system to make sure it aligns with the organization you work for. If it doesn't, you need to leave.
3. Excellent customer service doesn't equate to helping a student in ways that are unethical, illegal or hinders their development—even if the intent is moral.
4. Don't prejudge or discriminate. Uphold admissions standards set forth by the organization to promote access and service to those students most likely to benefit from the education and training offered.
5. Keep your eyes and ears open: avoidance of a situation or not getting involved in something you know is morally wrong IS morally wrong.
6. Make a commitment to act in morally appropriate ways—always!
7. Not providing complete information is just as bad as not telling the truth.
8. In any communication, it is the responsibility of the sender to ensure the receiver understands the message.
9. Seek training to expand your knowledge, skills and abilities to serve your students and your organization.
10. Treat your colleagues and students as if they are members of your family (the ones you like).
11. Ignorance is not a legal defense. It's your job to keep informed of the laws governing your profession, place of work, industry, state and country.
12. Do not use materials or sources other than those approved by your organization. Although the intent may be to inform, you may actually be causing more confusion or harm.
13. Since you won't be doing your student's homework for them, don't fill out any of their documents for admission or financial aid either.
14. Immediately report to management the actions of others or information that you believe to be out of compliance, inaccurate or harmful to students.
15. If something doesn't feel right, it probably isn't.
16. If you make a mistake, own it and fix it—FAST.

17. If you wouldn't be proud to have your work showcased on national television, don't do it.
18. Be proud of your profession and be an example for others to emulate.

Supplying your team with a code of ethics provides them guidelines to work within and helps them to stay compliant. Maintaining responsible and effective practices will also help improve service and student outcomes.

## **2. Define Responsible & Effective Practices**

As you know, today's student is better informed than in previous years, so lack of transparency is an ineffective practice. Access to information through web searches, social media, websites, chatrooms, etc. empowers prospective students with most of the data they need at their fingertips. And yet, when a prospective student asks for additional information, they are oftentimes told they must come on campus to receive anything more. This equates to poor customer service and in fact, is a big reason why conversion rates from set appointment to interview remain so low.

Inc. Magazine (Searcy, 2014) recently featured an article outlining the top eight sales traits of great sales people over those that are simply just good at what they do. In this study, the effective practices are defined as:

1. Assuming parity with customers
2. Being comfortable talking about money
3. Challenging the decision maker
4. Being comfortable with silence
5. Showing up prepared
6. Not rushing
7. Asking good questions
8. Providing impeccable follow-up

Many of the practices listed above are commonplace for those working in admissions. There is no mention here of withholding information or making it difficult to find necessary information. Great selling does not mean forcing the prospective student into a process that does not suit them; it is about customizing the experience to what meets their needs. The point is, if you are providing information in an ethical and transparent fashion in the way the prospective student wants to receive the information, than ethical selling is happening.

## **3. Add Flexibility to Your Presentation Practices**

Simply put, if you only have one way to sell, then you are only going to get the people who want to buy that way. Many admission offices practice a standardized interview process and there are many great reasons to do so. The challenge however is that prospective students are

entering into the process at varied stages. Some may have done extensive research and already know what they want, while others are just beginning to think about going back to college. What they share in common is the desire for customized information from a person they can trust. Oh and let us not forget; they are busy people so they want it fast, too.

It is ineffective to subject prospective students to a laundry list of questions that are clearly outdated and ineffective simply because that is how it has been done for years. Just look at the data to see how many of those who go through the current interview process actually end up starting school (not to mention the low number who actually graduate). Questions need to be meaningful, targeted, and strategic. Further, questions need to be focused to determine student discovery and fit within the school.

Long gone is the practice of showcasing every detail about the school and campus. Typically a prospective student can clearly indicate what they are most interested in as well as what is important for them to be successful. The best practice is to show you are actively listening by focusing the presentation and tour on what is most relevant to each and every individual.

It is also beneficial to understand the learning preference of your prospective student to increase comprehension. The VAK (Visual, Auditory, Kinesthetic) Concept comes from the world of Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP). For example, visual learners prefer to see things to understand them; kinesthetics learn best when doing something and auditory learners can comprehend best when they hear the information. Using VAK can help the admissions professional customize the presentation of information as well as the tour.

At the end of the day, when prospective students have options on where to go to school, selling is happening. This makes the sales competency an important part of the job for any professional admissions person. A weight of 15% on the selling competency doesn't lessen its importance, but rather indicates that today's students don't always trust an expert source. They will seek other opinions and do their own research too. Further development of the basic elements of selling is necessary along with the adoption of a code of conduct, enhancement of typical interview practices, and adding flexibility to the process.

The goal is for the prospective student and their family to make an informed choice with the admissions representative as their trusted guide. Any student who believes they were misinformed or lied to is a poor reflection on the admissions professional, the school, and the industry. Stay tuned for our next two installments of APPS with a focus on people skills and attitude.

### Sources

Bazaar Voice. (2012). *Talking to Strangers: Millennials Trust People over Brands*. Retrieved from [http://resources.bazaarvoice.com/rs/bazaarvoice/images/201202\\_Millennials\\_whitepaper.pdf](http://resources.bazaarvoice.com/rs/bazaarvoice/images/201202_Millennials_whitepaper.pdf)

Connor, Tim. (2003). *Soft Sell: The New Art of Selling*. 4<sup>th</sup> ed. Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, Inc.

Searcy, Tom. (2014) *8 Traits of Great Successful Salespeople*. Inc. Magazine.

Retrieved from <http://www.inc.com/welcome.html?destination=http://www.inc.com/tom-searcy/8-top-sales-traits-for-great-sales-people.html>

Tatum, Josh. (2008) *Telephone-harassment Statutes*. First Amendment Center.

Retrieved from <http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org/telephone-harassment-statutes>