

Enrollment Marketing Guide

for Graduate Programs



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Includes
Pro Tips

Enrollment Marketing Guide for Graduate Programs

Digital marketing is an incredibly powerful tool for attracting, converting, and engaging prospective graduate students throughout the enrollment funnel. Whether you're promoting your on-campus programs or growing online offerings, digital marketing is the key to meeting enrollment goals. Ready to improve your college or university's awareness, lead generation, applications, and yield for your graduate programs?

Find out which tactics are most effective in this guide, plus some pro tips from our higher ed marketing experts.

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Audience

A prospective graduate student typically has different motivations than a prospective undergraduate student – and different life circumstances, too. Understanding these differences is key in building an effective enrollment marketing campaign. Let's dive in.

Motivations

The average age of a graduate student in the United States is 33 years old. This typically means they have spent some time in the workforce following completion of their undergraduate degree. These adult learners are usually motivated to go back to school for a number of reasons:

- To start a new career in a chosen professional field
- To expand their knowledge in their field or related fields of professional specialization
- To secure a higher position within their existing company or field

These motivations ultimately drive how and what graduate students research when they are evaluating schools and programs. As a higher ed marketer, knowing these motivations helps you tailor your messaging toward a prospective graduate student by appealing to their motivations and desired outcomes from completing your program.

Audience

Needs

Many graduate students are looking to balance their continued professional development or career change alongside working, a family, and their personal life. This can be challenging, so convenience is typically top of their list. Graduate students value flexibility—in program format, start dates, and more. Promoting the convenience and flexibility of your online programs will resonate with this audience.

If they are going to invest the time to gain a higher degree or certificate, there needs to be an understanding of the return on this investment from the start, otherwise your program will not align with their needs. Prospective graduate students tend to search for information on financial aid, job placement rate, and networking opportunities.

Research Behaviors

Most graduate students already know exactly what kind of program they want to pursue. There may be some flexibility in their final choice, but these prospects have narrowed it down to a few similar programs or fields of study. Fewer students begin their search at specific schools first, making degree-specific marketing campaigns the right choice for graduate recruitment efforts.

When prospective students begin their research, most look to information online. This typically includes a query in a search engine or visiting a listicle of top schools for a certain program. Reaching prospective students while they are in these early phases of their research will lead to more inquiries down the enrollment funnel, and digital marketing is the means to do so.

Some graduate programs are targeted to students right out of college while other programs are geared toward working professionals. Consider your audience and where they would look for information. For example, to reach professionals looking to upskill, focus your advertising on LinkedIn. For recent grads, you might see more success with Instagram and Facebook.

Enrollment Funnel

The enrollment marketing funnel follows the stages of attracting and converting prospects into enrolled students. At each phase of the funnel, various calls-to-action are used to engage and qualify where that lead is in their journey.

Lead Generation

Attract visitors to your website to convert prospects into leads.

Calls-to-action: Inquire, Visit, Events

Lead Nurturing

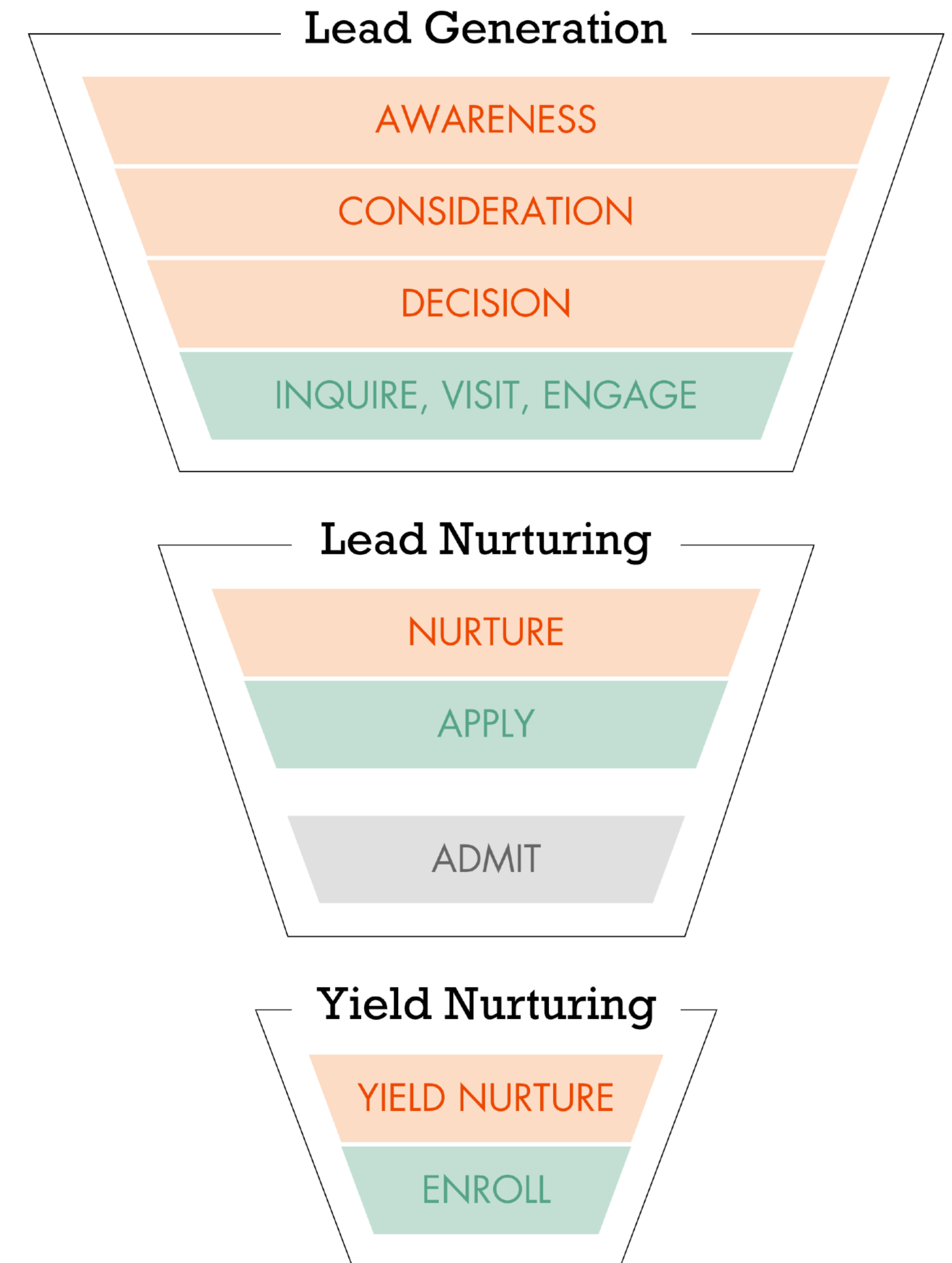
Engage and lead those prospects down the funnel.

Calls-to-action: Apply, Visit, Events

Yield Nurturing

Engage applicants to drive enrollment.

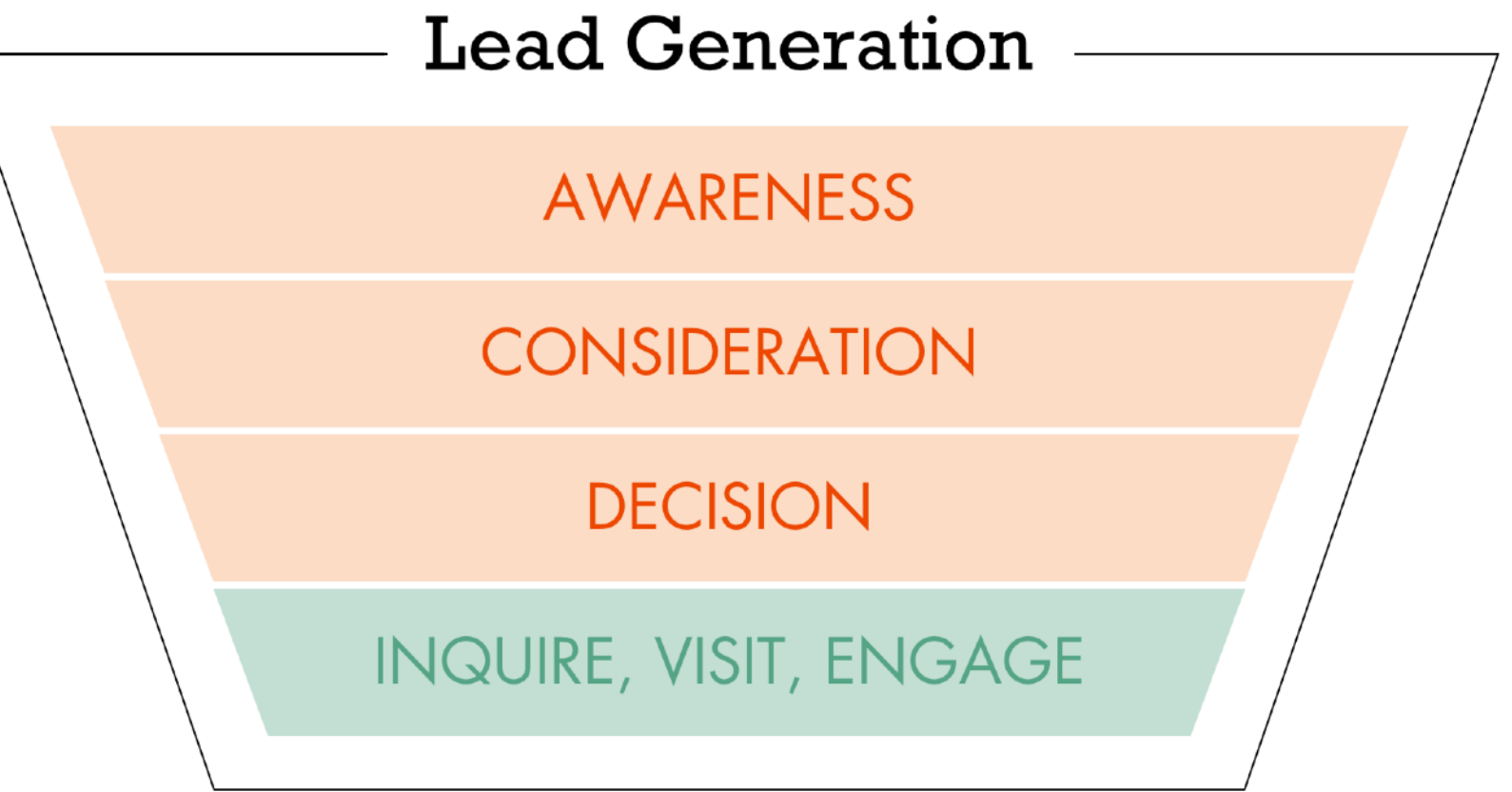
Calls-to-action: Enroll, Accepted Student Events



Digital Marketing Tactics for Enrollment

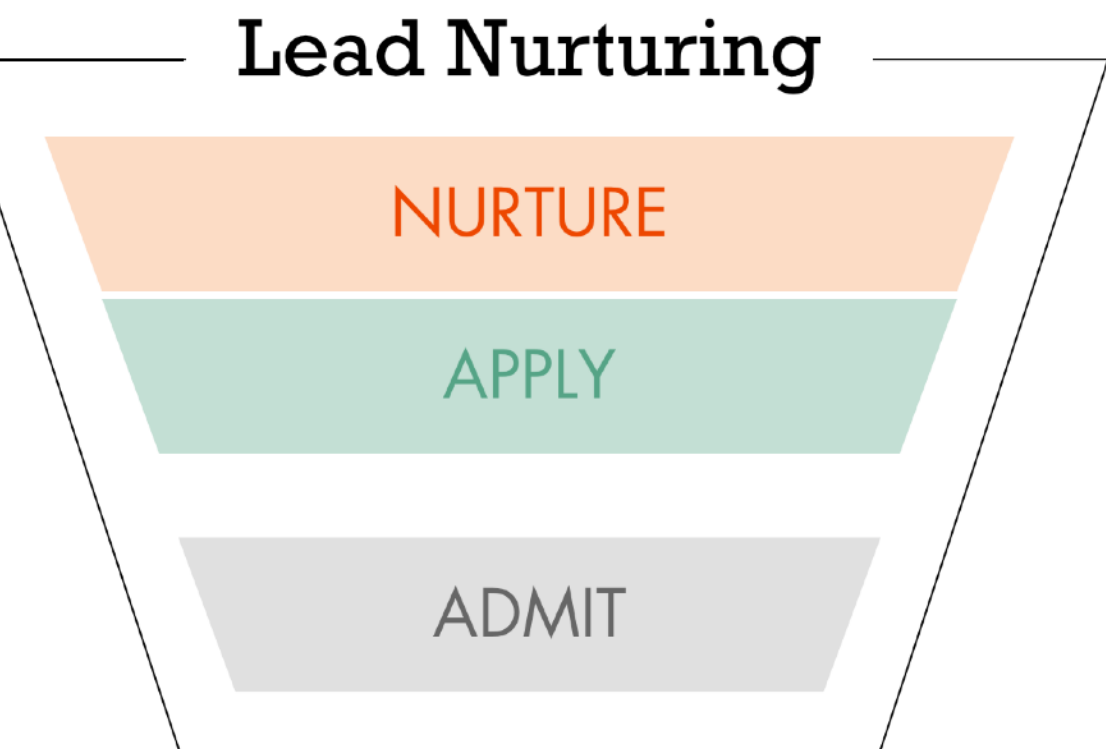
Lead Generation

OTT, Display, Paid Search, SEO, Social Media, Remarketing, CRO, Content/Inbound



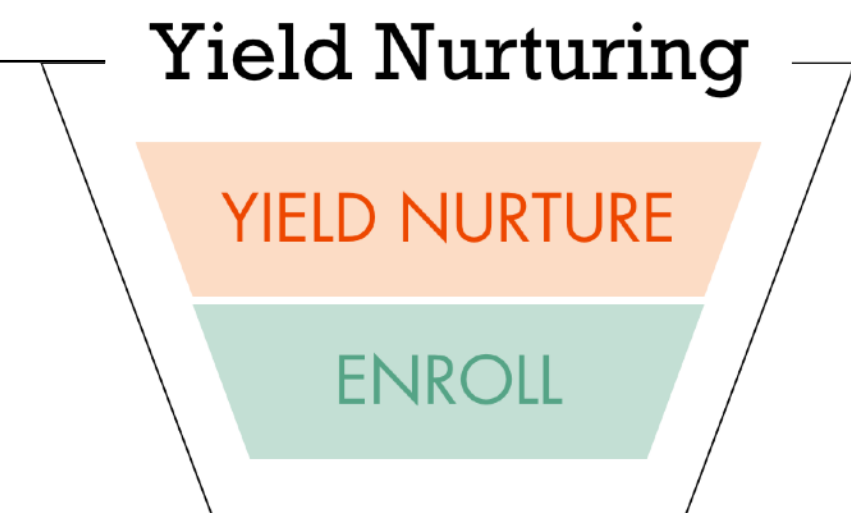
Lead Nurturing

Display, Social Media, Remarketing, CRO, Content/Inbound, Email



Yield Nurturing

Social Media, Remarketing, CRO, Content/Inbound, Email



Lead Generation

Over-the-Top Media

Over-The-Top media allows you to place video ads in long-form streaming media to increase reach and awareness.

PROS: More flexible and richer, more precise targeting than TV; strong for building awareness.

CONS: Creating suitable video assets is expensive; focuses on awareness rather than conversion.

Display Advertising

Display Network Placements place ads across hundreds of relevant websites in a single buy casting a broader net than individual website placements. Responsive display ads tend to perform better for lead generation, and banner display ads are usually the better option for building brand awareness and equity.

PROS: Broad reach; low cost and easy creative with responsive ad feature.

CONS: Low click-through rates and conversion rates; good creative can be expensive.

PRO TIP: Utilize “in-market” and “custom intent” targeting on the Google Display Network to boost your campaign performance. These targeting options can also be used in video campaigns on YouTube.

Lead Generation

Paid Search

Reaches prospects who are already searching for specific graduate programs by placing your website at the top of the Search Engine Results Page (SERP).

PROS: Quick to deploy; very adaptable; most targeted of all media typically engaging higher quality leads; highest conversion rates; often highest performing channel.

CONS: Increasingly costly; complex to do right; good at harvesting existing demand, but not at generating new demand (i.e., you can present your ads when people search for a keyword but you can't make more people search).

PRO TIP: Ensure ad messaging speaks to graduate student's needs/motivations. Ad copy should mention flexibility, career opportunities, or information about what they will gain/learn after completing the program.

Lead Generation

Social Media

With low cost per impression and good targeting capabilities, social media is a great vehicle for building awareness of your school and programs.

PROS: Quick to deploy; powerful targeting; low cost; high frequency; supports remarketing and targeting by email; ads can appear as “native” content; creative is inexpensive.

CONS: Most impressions and traffic will be on mobile devices which can be harder to convert.

PRO TIP: Use lookalike audiences to target people who are similar to those in your most relevant lists, for example, inquiries, accepted students, and enrolled students (past and present). Leverage LinkedIn for job title and industry targeting that align to your program areas. On both, consider the lead ad format to increase lead volume.

Lead Generation

SEO

Search Engine Optimization makes your website more visible to search engines by tailoring and expanding content on your website to appeal to search engines. As a result, your website will appear higher up on a Search Engine Results Page (SERP) – and more of your target audience will see and visit you.

PROS: High organic search rankings bring a lot of credibility; investing in SEO brings long-term dividends because you build a set of content assets you own forever.

CONS: Takes time and dedication for content creation to be successful; no guarantees of when or by how much search engine visibility will improve.

PRO TIP: Harvest the top questions prospective students are asking your admissions advisors and asking Google (find these using keyword research tools) and address them thoroughly on your website to grow search engine authority and visibility.

Lead Generation

Content Marketing

Creating and refreshing great content on your site as well as broadcasting your new content through vehicles such as social media help build a relationship with your audience and drive traffic to your website.

PROS: Great for brand building; places you in thought-leader role; higher engagement than traditional ads; strong targeting through social media; helps organic search rankings (SEO).

CONS: Requires committed strategy and planning to be effective; good content creation can be complex and costly.

PRO TIP: Videos are an effective way to communicate key messages to your prospective students. Use this medium to leverage personal and relevant student or alumni stories that can help drive applications.

Looking for Email?

Many colleges and universities purchase or rent lists for students who recently completed entrance exams such as the GRE. These lists are then used for blast email campaigns in hopes their message will convert these leads into applications.

These types of campaigns tend to see minimal conversions due to the lack of explicit opt-in and can have lasting negative impacts on email deliverability.

PRO TIP: Focus on generating engaged leads who want to hear from your school through content marketing and digital advertising. Instead, use those purchased lists to draw in prospective students through custom audience targeting.

Lead Generation

Remarketing

With even the best converting websites often seeing more than 80% of visitors leave without performing a desired conversion action (e.g., filling out a form, applying), remarketing presents the unique opportunity to reach those individuals again. The goal is to segment the audiences by specific pages visited, and bring these highly relevant, in-market audiences back to the website to generate additional inquiries, applications, and event sign-ups, that otherwise may not have occurred.

PROS: Powerful tool to get more leads out of any of your other marketing; strong conversion rates; good reminder channel for ongoing communications.

CONS: Important to use “frequency caps” to make sure your target audiences do not feel “stalked”; good creative can be expensive.

PRO TIP: Use “responsive ads” to gain higher impression volume and click-through rates. Look beyond Google and consider remarketing through Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, LinkedIn or Programmatic.

Lead Generation

Conversion Rate Optimization (CRO)

Paying for more traffic to meet enrollment goals can be costly; step in CRO, which capitalizes on the traffic you are already receiving, converting users to leads at a higher rate without additional advertising investment.

PROS: Iterative approach driving incremental change; typically lower cost than a full website overhaul; can improve the effectiveness of paid campaigns.

CONS: Not all changes will improve the experience — need to measure each change to understand its impact on your metrics.

PRO TIP: Align the calls-to-action on each page to the assumed intent of the visitor of that page based on the content. For example, on a page covering “What is Criminal Justice?” a visitor is likely not ready to apply, so instead offer a call-to-action to request more information.

Lead Nurturing

Social Media

Social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn allow you to serve ads to your inquiry list simply by providing their emails. This power targeting mechanism allows you to segment your audience and customize messaging based on program and where they are in the enrollment funnel (e.g., Apply now). Use Facebook's Custom Audiences to load your email list of leads from your CRM and promote applications and their deadlines to these leads.

PROS: Quick to deploy, powerful targeting, low cost/high frequency; allows very specific targeting of your lead lists for remarketing based on email address; ads can appear as “native” content; creative is inexpensive.

CONS: Most impressions and traffic will be on mobile devices which can be harder to convert. Typically, only 40-60% of your email list will be matched to Facebook users that can be targeted so it cannot be relied upon as the only mechanism to reach your entire email list.

PRO TIP: Host and invite leads to a Facebook Live event where you can cover more information about their program of interest, financial aid and answer questions from the audience. Turn the recording of that live event into an on-demand offering on your website or through email campaigns.

Lead Nurturing

Remarketing

Reach out to your previously converted leads with display, social, and text ads that include calls-to-action (CTAs) that move them to the next level of engagement within your website. Customize messages based on past behavior to move them along the funnel toward applying.

PROS: Powerful tool to get more leads out of any of your other marketing; strong conversion rates; good reminder channel for ongoing communications.

CONS: Important to use “frequency caps” to make sure your target audiences do not feel “stalked”; good creative can be expensive.

PRO TIP: Use “responsive ads” to gain higher impression volume and click-through rates. Look beyond Google and consider remarketing through Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, LinkedIn or Programmatic.

Conversion Rate Optimization (CRO)

CRO at this phase focuses on converting existing leads into qualified leads by improving their conversion rate on later-stage actions such as Apply Now. Optimize landing pages and key website pages for applications and application deadlines.

PROS: Will get you the most applications out of your existing marketing spend.

CONS: Not much time to iterate with application deadlines approaching.

Lead Nurturing

Email

Email is still one of the most effective forms of direct marketing. Use the email list from your lead generation activities to remind people of the approaching application deadline.

PROS: Direct, low-cost channel; effective, expressive medium.

CONS: Typically only 20%-30% of your email recipients will open your email, so it should not be relied upon as the only means to reach your lead list.

PRO TIP: Build email nurturing sequences to move prospective students down the funnel toward applying. If your applicant tracking system is integrated with your email software, segment and set up triggered email reminders when a student starts an application but does not complete it in a certain number of days.

Yield Nurturing

Social Media

Target your email list of accepted applicants using Facebook Custom Audiences or LinkedIn Matched Audiences and engage them on social media.

PROS: Offers additional touchpoints for users who may be trained to ignore / skim email communications. Catches them natively on platforms they engage with frequently.

CONS: Typically, only 40-60% of your email list will be matched to Facebook or LinkedIn users that can be targeted, so it cannot be relied upon as the only mechanism to reach your entire accepted student list.

PRO TIP: Provide targeted ongoing content so they can feel the energy and buzz of your college or university prior to decision time.

Yield Nurturing

Remarketing

Keep accepted students engaged with your school. As accepted students visit web pages devoted to them, they become members of the remarketing list of accepted students and begin seeing ads and promoted content created just for them.

PROS: Great way to deepen relationships with your accepted students and employ reminder advertising of Accepted Student Days.

CONS: Important to use “frequency caps” to make sure your accepted students do not feel “stalked”; good creative can be expensive.

PRO TIP: Similar to lead generation, make sure to use a broad selection of remarketing platforms to reach this high-value audience.

Yield Nurturing

Content Marketing

Create content specific to your accepted students to continue to engage them and build excitement.

PROS: Engages students with the information they seek.

CONS: Requires committed strategy and planning to be effective; good content creation can be complex and costly.

Conversion Rate Optimization (CRO)

Optimize landing pages and key website pages for Accepted Students Days.

PROS: Eliminates barriers and makes it easy for accepted students to sign up for Accepted Student Days.

CONS: Requires expertise to do well; should be an iterative improvement process.

PRO TIP: Use social proof on your landing page to encourage action. Embed your Twitter feed onto the landing page and retweet students who are voicing their excitement about attending their upcoming Accepted Students Day.

Yield Nurturing

Email

Segment your students into lists for 'Accepted students who haven't visited' and 'Accepted students who haven't enrolled' to develop tailored and timely communications for each. Rich, engaging content can show prospective students how exciting their student experience will be.

PROS: Direct, low-cost channel; effective, expressive medium.

CONS: Typically, only 20%-30% of your email recipients will look at your email so it should not be relied on as the only means to reach your accepted students list.

PRO TIP: Personalization can increase the engagement with your email campaigns. Segment your lists further by program so messages, timelines and images are even more relevant to your audience.

About VONT Performance Digital Marketing

At VONT, we believe that change is the only constant in the digital world – and that excites us. Over the years, digital marketing has played an ever-growing role in higher education recruitment. From lead generation for inquiries, campus visits, and applications, to increasing brand awareness and student yield – digital marketing and ongoing optimizations can have a significant impact on the objectives that confront today’s higher ed marketer.

We believe in this idea of continual fine-tuning so much that we named our company VONT, which means to achieve exponential improvement in incremental steps. It is our core belief, and the reason why we are not simply a web design company or simply a digital advertising agency, but rather a long-term, single-source partner providing a comprehensive array of web development and digital marketing capabilities for higher education clients.

In short, we’re here so that our higher education clients achieve success in the ever-changing digital world.

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