

ENROLLMENT MANAGER

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DESIGNING AND IMPLEMENTING AN EFFECTIVE STUDENT SEARCH

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Among the multitude of tasks that face college admissions and enrollment professionals, the design and implementation of an effective student search is certainly one of the most important. It not only provides the main pool of prospects for admission, but it is often the manner in which the institution introduces itself to candidates. By providing an impressive “first look,” the search can be key in attracting the caliber of student that best fits with the college’s offerings and objectives. This article will explore the design of an effective search as well as its implementation and follow-up.

Company Background

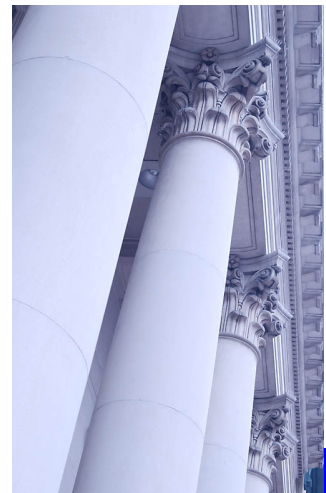
Premier Collegiate Communications was founded in 1992 by college administrators who recognized the need for specialty communications in the admissions arena. Mass marketing techniques were viewed as ineffective as they often did not reflect the quality of the institution, the personal nature of the admissions process, nor the importance of each potential candidate. In response to these issues, Premier pioneered the use of personalized communications via multiple channels along with a consistent schedule of communication tailored to each student. Premier provides its customers a unique combination in admissions marketing as we are able to design, produce, and physically or electronically mail all of the communications required by college admissions professionals. This provides a “one-stop shop” for

admissions where the responsibility for the effectiveness of communications is concentrated in one vendor, rather than spread out among many firms that often have competing goals.

Premier’s President, Doug Spadaro, has served as a faculty member and administrator at several prestigious colleges and universities, both public and private. During his academic career, Doug engineered the integration of admissions, business office, and academic systems so as to permit sophisticated analysis of student demographic trends. Prior to entering higher education, Doug had a successful career in private industry in the Information Technology and Financial areas of several Fortune 500 companies. His academic background, along with his business experience, give him a unique insight into the challenges facing higher education, the competitive nature of the admissions process, and the analysis of complex markets and customer data.

David Waggoner, Vice President, has had an admissions career spanning more than two decades. Prior to joining Premier, David served as Vice President for enrollment management at a large private university where he developed and implemented an innovative strategy featuring academic award programs based on high school GPA and standardized test scores. This strategy, along with aggressive telemarketing and systematic direct mail communication to prospects, resulted in the university doubling its full-time undergraduate enrollment during David’s tenure. David has also worked as an enrollment management consultant which afforded him the opportunity to spend (see *Effective Student Search* p.2)

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time on numerous college campuses around the country. Finally, Mr. Waggoner served as chief enrollment officer at a for-profit institution in New York City where he successfully enrolled record numbers of students.

The diverse talents of Premier's senior management, the dedication and professionalism of its loyal staff, its ability to design, produce, and send all under one roof, and its superior customer focus and service have resulted in a steady and growing customer base. Premier's clients span from coast to coast and represent all facets of higher education. Although the majority of our customers are private institutions, we also work with several state universities as well as a handful of "for-profit" colleges. This broad customer base has provided Premier with tremendous experience in all aspects of college admission communication. We are able to draw on this experience to serve our clients with any of their communication needs.

Search Design

The first step in designing an effective search is to clearly define the goals of the enrollment area as enumerated by the college community. Once these goals are defined, they must be realistically assessed based on current student demographics and the institution's ability to provide a fit with potential candidates. For example, all of our long-term clients have moved well beyond the basic global search technique to the point where they are systematically refining their search parameters. These refinements include emphasizing specific higher GPA and exam scores, expanding geography, increasing diversity, or implementing new majors and programs. As such, Premier routinely performs "what-if" scenarios for these clients using actual search data.

Once everyone has agreed on the objectives of the search, we then focus on the data sources. Obviously, the two national testing services, The College Board (SAT) and American College Testing ACT must be considered. Both of these services offer the ability to purchase student names within a month of the student taking the respective test. Additionally, the College Board offers an "All Student" option which creates a standing order that automatically selects student names as they are made available from the tests.

There are also several private student data services that poll high school students on their career interests. The advan-

tage of using these services is that they provide an interim source of student data between the regularly scheduled national SAT and ACT exams. They might also be more appropriate sources for institutions that do not require standardized test scores. The disadvantages include the fact that they often include students that have no post-secondary plans as well as the fact that not all school systems permit these private firms to poll their students.

It appears as though the college recruiting cycle keeps moving earlier and earlier in the student's high school career. Both SAT and ACT offer the ability to purchase sophomore high school student names. Several of our clients take advantage of this; however, most continue to start the recruiting cycle in earnest when the student reaches the junior level in high school. Regardless of whether or not you choose sophomores or juniors, you **MUST** have a communications plan in place to stay in touch with these students after the initial contact. Searching a sophomore student only makes sense if you have a plan to regularly communicate with them throughout the remainder of their high school career. You might even do more harm than good by contacting a sophomore via a search and then ignoring them for a year or more until your regular communication flow begins.

Premier has developed comprehensive communication strategies that begin at both the sophomore and junior high school levels. We have found the key to be the pace at which student contact is made. When we start a student in the recruiting cycle as a sophomore, we communicate with them less frequently than if they are started as a junior – but we do communicate. The pace picks up so that in their senior year they are receiving information from our clients in various forms two or three times per month.

Finally, all student search services offer the ability to customize searches based on numerous student parameters such as geography, major interest, sports and extra-curricular preferences, educational goals and grades and scores. Additionally, Premier has developed a search technique that allows us to determine an individual student's scores and grades directly from the search data. This technique has proved invaluable in offering our clients the ability to discuss specific scholarships and awards available to the student in the initial search mailing so as to catch the student's, and their parent's, attention. We have found that the ability to communicate financial incentives at the beginning of the recruiting cycle dramatically improves search results. (*see Effective Student Search p.3*)

EFFECTIVE STUDENT SEARCH CONTINUED:

Premier has also pioneered the use of using student search parameters specific to the goals of the college and the particular majors offered. For example, one of our clients has an undergraduate program that is unique and nationally recognized. As we design their search, we target a national audience for that program with different GPA and test-score criteria than for their other programs where geography may play the most important role in a student's college choice. Many of our clients also have as a goal increased diversity on campus. By careful manipulation of the search criteria we are able to meet this objective.

Implementing the Search

Admission professions realize a great many direct mail firms are more than happy to send out tens of thousands of search pieces. Of course most of these firms will approach your project just like they approach putting retail catalogs or brochures for swampland in South Florida in the mail! As noted above, the principals at Premier Communications bring experience in the field of college recruiting to the table. Our dedication is shown by the fact that we're typically in the office at midnight on the morning the College Board releases PSAT data in order to help ensure that your Search piece is one of the first to reach a prospective student's mailbox. Our expertise and understanding of the particular needs of college recruiting is also illustrated by the fact that we actively counsel our clients against using traditional tri-fold Search pieces. Your primary goal in Search is to catch the attention of a prospective student. How can you do

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this sending out a tri-fold that looks like what your competition is sending out?

Unique Search Communication

Premier Communications favors an alternative to the traditional tri-fold Search piece. A personalized postcard can be more effective. Variable, digital printing is a relatively new technology that permits every item in a given production job to be unique. Sometimes referred to as "image personalization" it allows the recipient's name to be incorporated into the picture on the face of the card in an incredibly creative, attention-getting manner. The name isn't just printed on top of an image, but rather is part of the image, which makes every card unique and personal! Nor are you limited to a single image in a given Search. Many clients have further personalized their Search by using different images to promote different majors or target specific groups, i.e., men, women, scholarship students, etc. Premier Communications is a strong proponent of this new strategy. Personalized cards are unique and stand out, cutting through the mailbox clutter created when the typical high school student is contacted by several hundred colleges. In fact, at a time when the national response rate on Student Search hovers at 1%, our clients have seen rates as high as 7% when using personalized postcards!



Variable, digital printing also permits personalization of the copy on the back of the cards on the basis of factors such as intended major, geography, gender, scholarship ability, etc. In addition the postcards incorporate a personal URL (PURL), e.g., David.Waggoner.MyPremierMailUSA.com, which combines the recipient's first and last name and a domain connoting your institution. (see *Effective Student Search* p.4)

EFFECTIVE STUDENT SEARCH CONTINUED:

This personalization generates a novelty factor that further enhances response rate. When the PURL is keyed into a browser a personalized website opens. This website provides information about your institution and includes an Information Request Contact Form that can be submitted via the Internet. Premier has also recently added a cell phone text messaging option for searches. Each student is assigned a unique number which they are invited to text message to the institution so as to receive additional information. After they send it, they receive a message such as “Thank you for your interest in XYZ College. We will be in touch with you shortly.” Premier records these unique text message numbers, matches them with the student search record, and supplies them to the client for follow up. This new service takes advantage of the “texting” mania which is proliferating among high school students.

The Role of E-mail

Many institutions have begun to experiment with email as a Search tool and we agree it has a valid role. However, we argue strenuously against relying solely upon it for three reasons. First, only about two-thirds of College Board and ACT records include an email address, so by definition you fail to contact many prospective students in any given set of Search parameters. Secondly, teenagers are notorious for changing Internet providers, and hence their email address, routinely. Therefore many of the email addresses provided by the testing services are out of date by the time you receive data and bounce back rates are extremely high. Finally, think for a moment about the amount of SPAM reaching your inbox on a daily basis. Studies show most individuals delete email from unrecognized sources without ever opening it. For all these reasons Premier Communications advocates using email as a follow-up to Search letters and personalized postcards. Our clients have found the first piece creates name recognition for their institution, which enhances the open rate when the follow-up email arrives. We recommend incorporating personalized URLs (PURLs) and links to your institution’s website in the body of the Search emails.

In the Dark Ages of Student Search when tri-fold mailers predominated (and perhaps in your office today??) Search response took the form of the tear off reply card. These tended to accumulate in large stacks in little trafficked corners of the

office as legions of student work study students slowly progressed through the tedious task of data entry. In fact, if you’ve been in the field of college recruiting for more than a few months you’ve undoubtedly engaged in lively sessions of “guess how this is spelled”! Unfortunately admission office databases often reflect the fact that deciphering the handwriting on these cards is an inexact science.

Evaluating the Search

Utilizing personal URLs (PURLs) greatly facilitates the response process. As noted above, keying a personal URL (PURL) into a browser opens a website that contains information about your institution. The website also includes an Information Request Contact Form which the card recipient can use to express interest in your institution. Basic information in the form – name, address, city, state and zip – is typically pre-populated. This is both a customer service (it saves the prospective student the need to key in the information) and further enhances personalization. Beyond this basic information the form is personalized to the needs of our clients, and typically includes such items as intended major, intended start term, etc. Schools that award academic scholarships will often solicit grade point and test score information. A secure Report Page is established online and the client is provided a username and password. Admission personnel can access the Report Page as frequently as they wish and download responses directly into their admission office database. Hard to decipher reply cards, and incorrect data entry, is thus a thing of the past! So too is the expense of paying the postage associated with paper reply cards, and the expense involved in paying support staff or student employees to key the information into your database. In addition to reporting back to the client all information solicited on the Reply Form, we are able to provide you with all information that was part of the database used for the mailing. When using College Board and ACT data typical items include gender, ethnicity, high school CEEB code, year of graduation, etc.

Reporting and evaluation of Search efforts is further enhanced by assigning a unique Source Code to each Search, e.g., PSAT_Feb2009. Each response downloaded from your Report Page can therefore be tracked back to a specific Search, which allows you to make informed decisions about your Search parameters and the effectiveness of your strategy. (*see Effective Student Search p.5*)

EFFECTIVE STUDENT SEARCH CONTINUED:

For example, a private liberal arts school in the South has been using our personalized postcards for both SAT and ACT searches for the past several years. Their response rate has typically been approximately 4%. The VP for Enrollment Management decided last fall to conduct an experiment using a new source of data. The geographic and academic parameters of the records purchased were similar to those used in the school's traditional searches, as was the design of the postcards mailed. The response rate, however, was less than 1%. Based on this accurate evaluation the VP is extremely unlikely to utilize this new source of names in future Searches!

Search Follow Up

As discussed previously, an effective search does not end with the search itself. A comprehensive communications plan must be in place prior to the search so as to cultivate all leads that the search generates. Premier designs this communications plan based on the grade level of the student, with the pace of student contact increasing as the student moves towards their high school commencement.

Students that have responded to the search enter a "rollover" communications schedule with pre-determined dates and communications pieces scheduled to be sent to them. This schedule is developed jointly by Premier and the client with all involved parties (Admissions, IT, Premier production personnel, etc.), participating. These responder students routinely receive communication from the college in the form of direct mail letters, e-mails, flyers about specific programs, open house reminders, view-books, and other informative items. The communication is geared to where the student is in recruitment process, with prospects, applied, accepted and deposited students receiving different items.

Students that have not responded to the initial search are also tracked. Typically, because of its low cost, e-mail blasts are scheduled to be routinely sent to these students. These e-mails often include the individual PURL for the student so that all they have to do is click on it to respond. These "non-responder" e-mails have typically resulted in a good response.

Search Evolution

Search development and implementation is not a one-time project, but rather an on-going, dynamic process. Successful admissions programs continually evaluate and refine their searches based on changes in institutional goals, new program development, demographics and technology. Premier's unique expertise and client focus allows us to assist institutions at any level of higher education with this key aspect of their enrollment plan.

MANAGEMENT MODULES ESSENTIAL TO DEALING WITH RECRUITMENT CHALLENGES IN UNCERTAIN TIMES

Michael A. Kapin, Ph.D.
Researcher

Managing recruitment efforts in a private or proprietary college or university has always been a challenge. In today's uncertain economic climate, it is critical that every qualified student be given the opportunity to learn the attributes of your school in order to make matriculation a reality.

The mortgage crisis, corporate bankruptcies, factory and company closings, the scarcity of credit, stock market declines, layoffs and rising unemployment have created an environment where the benefits of post-secondary education are more difficult to explain and the costs are a much more determining consideration for students and their families.

Effective communication has always been important but new economic realities make it essential. Colleges and universities must continue to provide all of the basic information to prospective students but such communication must be data-driven and subject to constant analysis and evaluation.

Walking students and their families through each step in the admission process will always be a key aspect of the communication plan. Encouraging campus visits, educating families about financial aid programs (whether need-based or academic), explaining institutional teaching methods and curricular strengths, exploring co-curricular opportunities such as student clubs, organizations and athletics and touting distinct benefits associated with (*see Management Modules p.6*)

MANAGEMENT MODULES CONTINUED:

attendance at a particular institution are more relevant than ever.

It has been my experience as a researcher that similar communication objectives are common in college and university recruitment strategies, but they are often not calculated, demonstrated, analyzed and tracked in a data-driven, systematic way.

The need to incorporate all types of communication into your plan should be obvious. Information must be provided to prospective students in person, on the telephone, via some form of direct mail and/or written publications, and in all electronic formats including your web site, e-mail, text messaging and social network postings. The hard part is finding an efficient mechanism to track all communication in a manner that produces data and outcomes that can be utilized in day-to-day decision-making in enrollment management.

Recently I had the opportunity to review the *Recruitment Management Module* offered by **Collegiate Apps**, a Moorestown, NJ organization led by a group with diverse expertise in subjects including technology, executive and university leadership, data management, and telemarketing. The company offers an off-the-shelf software product designed to assist enrollment leaders in the task of accurately tracking and reporting communication efforts and results. As described by the team, the product is low cost and high yield and makes the difficult task of managing and evaluating all types of recruitment communication manageable. Most important this is an “academic specific” enrollment management tool, not just a remake of something used by the business community.

The module reviewed is a SAAS tool (i.e., no requirement for investing in hardware or software as everything is web-based and can be accessed from any authorized pc) in which each prospective student’s profile can be loaded and matched to specific communication actions.

- Users are able to use all forms of communication with prospective students systematically. Specific communication tasks can be timed and delivered throughout the cycle.

- The module addresses list management: purchased names, inquiries, first time applicants and transfer or adult applicants and even currently enrolled students.
- Calling guides can be easily designed to include scripts and hot topics for communication.
- The product can readily perform any necessary credential calculations such as test score conversions and grade point average scales.
- Important dates can be scheduled, tracked and monitored such as date of application, date of acceptance, campus visit date, financial aid application date, deposit date and registration date.
- Admission counselor and student recruiter activities can be reviewed and evaluated every week and positive outcomes assessed.
- Additional modules address Development requirements in the same manner.

The influence of effective communication with prospective students and their families is vital in these uncertain economic times. Enrollment managers should be sure to utilize the latest technology in order to provide the information necessary for families to make decisions regarding higher education choices.

Additional information can be obtained through Collegiate Apps web-site or by contacting them at support@collegiateapps.com.

Dr. Michael Kapin, has broad experience in research including drug discovery, clinical development, project management, data package review, and marketing in addition to university teaching and lecture experience.

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