ENROLLMENT MANAGER

HOW WE DID IT! (OUR ALL-TIME RECORD ENROLLMENT IN FALL 2009)

Bill Firman
Dean of Admission
Wesley College

In February 2008 Wesley College purchased 100,000 names of high school juniors who had taken the SAT. These students were sent a "personalized URL card" [PURL]. This card was a slightly larger-than-post-card-sized, high-gloss photo of a cell phone with a personalized message on the screen saying, "Hi, [first name]! You have 1 message, from Wesley College". On the reverse were instructions for going to their own personalized Wesley web site: firstname.lastname.@wesley.com. From that site, students were provided with links to 15 different points of interest on the Wesley web site [financial aid, cost, student life, etc].

Once the students accessed their web site, their data was downloaded to our database. At that point, they became a Wesley inquiry and received new promotional materials including a viewbook, visitor's guide and an open house invitation. They also became part of a six-letter direct mail series [sent over six months] from various alumni of the College [as well as the President] discussing different strengths of the College.

These prospective students were contacted via telephone by our evening telecounselors who called to discuss their eligibility for Wesley academic scholarships and grants and to encourage them to apply for admission.

Those various stages of contact [PURL, viewbooks, letter series, phone calls] over a six-month period beginning with those 100,000 in February 2008 [and followed up with another separate group of 100,000 now-rising seniors in June 2008, who had taken the SAT] generated a record applicant pool. Applications increased 63% compared to the previous year. Once the students applied, our exceptional admissions team entered into the process and began their work.

We were fortunate that we started the admissions cycle in September 2008 with a full staff [as we know, not always the case in admissions] of five very capable and dedicated admission counselors.

These counselors maintained a communications plan [phone, email, and letter] of sustained monthly contact with each applicant throughout the cycle. This sustained communication provided applicants with constant updates on their applications, including materials still needed to complete the application review, important information on the financial aid process, invitations to visit campus for individual tours and other pertinent information.

More applications made possible improvement in the academic profile of the fall 2009 class. We were able to be more selective about those offered admission to the College for Fall 2009. The applicant pool was so large, that even with greater selectivity, we were still able to generate a large pool of accepted students.

Once a student was accepted, the counselors continued their intense communication with the student, with the messages slightly altered to include more follow-up on the student's financial aid application. At this stage in the cycle, *(see How we Did It! p.2)*

Happy New Year to all our readers!

HOW WE DID IT! CONTINUED:

the counselors had one goal: remove every conceivable barrier that would keep an accepted student from making an enrollment deposit. These obstacles may be financial, academic, social, or a combination thereof. Obviously, we were unable to remove every obstacle for every student. Once an obstacle arrived that could not be overcome, invariably the student would decline our offer of admission. This was positive, though, in that it allowed the counselors to concentrate their efforts on a steady pool of *actively interested* accepted students.

With these remaining students, as obstacles were removed [financial aid awards, tours of the campus confirming the student's original belief that Wesley was a good fit, etc], students began depositing. They did so earlier and in greater numbers than in history. Eventually, an all-time record number of them enrolled at Wesley in the Fall.

How did Wesley do it?

- A great deal of hard work by a dedicated staff of counselors and support staff who provided better client service to potential students than competing institutions were able to deliver.

- We purchased more search names.

- We had our staff in place earlier than ever.

- We had a firm recruiting plan – the seeds of which were actually started back in October 2007 when we began creating new recruiting materials like viewbooks, visitors guides, posters, etc] – from which we never strayed.

MAKING YOUR WEB SITE "SEARCH ENGINE FRIENDLY"

April Clark
CAS Marketing Consultant
CAS

First, put on your "search engine thinking cap!" The more your creative folks can "think" like a search engine, the more successful your site will be. But strike a happy balance, don't think so hard that your site becomes a spam victim.

Understanding how a search engine works is the second step. Search engines look at your HTML code within your web pages and try to extract the content of your text. Then this page text goes into the search engine's index – which is a huge pool of Web site information – accompanied by the page's input and output links. When you enter your search criteria, this causes a search engine to look through its index and pull a list of all the Web pages that include your requested search. Then that list is judged mostly on the number, high rating and honesty of the links that point to each page. So if your web site/pages do not include common search words, then your university site will rarely if ever show up on search lists. In fact, the search engines probably won't even index your pages! Once the matching pages are identified in the search, the list is ranked according to relevance. Relevance is determined on many, many criteria – such as the number of times the keyword appears on your site and exactly where those keywords appear. HOWEVER… useless repeating of favorite keywords becomes spam software targets if you aren't careful.

Back to "thinking like a search engine…" If you look at your existing web copy and you see that the first few paragraphs are much too wordy…. you need to change the copy. Also see if the titles for this page have your most important key words shown first (in some bad cases, they might be actually last!) A simple switching of the location of certain important search words for that page to the beginning, and the top of your page can really help to raise your ratings. This is putting to use the idea of keyword prominence and it works on both levels – within a title tag as well as the wider view, within the whole page.

As you can see, it is a balancing act between honest placement of keywords, and overkill which will trigger the spam penalty – and decrease your relevance score.

There is one more step you can use to encourage good behavior by the search engine – you can put your keywords in heading tags to emphasize them. Again look at what you are putting together – make sure the page structure is appealing, the content design includes the keywords inside heading tags, body copy and other tags – THEN be sure your copy is interesting and drives your readers to excitement about your institution.

Some guidelines for your writing:

WEB SITE CONTINUED:

Have at least a couple hundred words of copy for each page — all keyword focused. Include images and your copyright statement.

When you are creating your links, be sure to include good keyword-rich text in your link text. Again, thinking like a search engine — leave out instruction such as "click here" or "for more information," because they mean absolutely nothing to a search engine, so are wasted. Instead choose words that are relevant to the page you are linking to.

I mentioned the importance of links, the quality of links, and the connection of Google rankings to links. So, how do you build up your links? There are three basic supports that affect search engine optimization:

content - which means basing your content on the keywords that are popular with your target audience

architecture — which means creating a site architecture that is conducive to high search rankings

links — which means you want to attract inbound links that point to your site

These three supports work together to drive the desired traffic to your site. However, linking typically is the least utilized of the three, despite the fact that websites' search rankings are totally dependent on other Webmasters linking to your site. No links equals no traffic. It is definitely NOT a sheer numbers game — the search engines use complicated algorithms to rank the value of a link. Important links such as msnbc.com count more

than one from Heidi's personal page.

So how do you improve your score? First, like any marketing ploy, you need to measure it. The Google Toolbar is available for free. Go to http://toolbar.google.com. The Google toolbar installs into your Web browser — either Internet Explorer or Firefox. Once installed the Google toolbar sports a small PageRank meter that indicates the importance of the page being currently viewed. Pretty cool!

Put your cursor over the meter and a numerical score between 0 and 10 displays — 0 being the worst and 10 being the best. All the scores are not equal — it is much easier to move from 3 to 4, than the huge move from 7 to 8!! Be aware that there is a lag in reporting current scores, so Google Toolbar is an approximation, good for comparison. You can find other measuring tools like mozRank.

Generally speaking, the best links are obtained by merit by offering noteworthy, valuable content on your web site. When Webmasters and bloggers find out *(see Web Site p.4)*

WEB SITE CONTINUED:

you have content worthy of their notice – they are moved to link. This is known as "link bait." Think of "scoops," humor, tools, downloads, how-tos, original research, event coverage, quizzes, or other historic information. I think you can see how some of these "link bait" topics can tie in with your institution's web pages.

Here are some things you can do to find and attract good links. Proactively solicit links carefully. Identify good targets by reviewing the links of competitive sites (like similar institutions to yours) and sites in your keyword market. What shows up when you search on your own target keywords? What do you see when you check their links? When you visit, suggest a link as a site visitor, or contact them representing yourself from your site. As in many pursuits, communicating accomplishes your goals. You can offer them some encouragement to include a link to your site by giving them constructive feedback on their site, as well as including your link. If you notice a problem with their site, tell them. The art of linking involves cooperation to become a win-win situation. It isn't necessarily easy.

The next hint is to "Build Outside the Box." Don't go where everyone else goes. Think differently. Be creative. Involve your students in your brainstorming sessions. They know what links will attract potential new students to your site.

Add those links. Don't forget to be blogging – blogs typically attract more links than e-commerce sites. Did you ever hear about blog carnivals? Find a directory at blogcarnival.org – organized by topic.

Blog carnivals constantly link to worthy sites. They focus on different topics where the participating bloggers share their newest finds in lots of different items like articles, blog posts, events, etc. If you connect the upcoming week's blogger with helpful suggestions for content (and links) to feature, your email will be welcomed. It's a whole new world out there and if your web site is to continue to be vibrant and well-visited, you need to keep up on all the new possibilities. Be creative, attract new and powerful links and you will see an increase in higher quality visitors to your web site.

COMMENCEMENT IS A BEGINNING (ALUMNI DEVELOPMENT, OF COURSE!)

Douglas Spadaro, Ph.D.
President
Premier Communications

David Waggoner, M.A.
Vice President
Premier Communications

As graduation speakers often point out, commencement is a time of celebration and new beginnings. Administration, faculty and staff are happy about another job well done. Parents and families evidence pride in children and relatives. And, most importantly, new graduates exalt in their accomplishments and look forward to the future.

A significant aspect of this future is the ongoing lifetime relationship that graduates have with the college as alumni. From your perspective, commencement is the start of cultivating positive relationships with your alumni. Clearly college administrators want to make the most of this day of transition as young adults move from being accomplished students to being loyal benefactors.

In the spring of 2009, Premier was approached by one of our long-term clients with a unique challenge: Was there a way to utilize our specialized collegiate communications expertise and technologies to enhance a rather routine ritual – commencement? After much *(see Commencement p.5)*

COMMENCEMENT CONTINUED:

brainstorming, the client and our creative staff developed the novel idea of a personalized graduation announcement and invitation. This concept plays off the idea of the diploma. Each diploma is personalized, so why not carry this theme to the commencement announcement as well?

An example of the finished product can be seen below. We have incorporated personalization in three places in the announcement: The graduate's name, the degree earned, and the college by which it is awarded. Each student received five personalized invitations and matching envelopes. These were mailed by Premier in a college envelope directly to the graduating students. Also included in the package was a letter from the college's Provost congratulating graduates on their achievement. In addition, an editable version of the invitation was made available on the college's website so that students could download it and create their own personalized invitations if more were needed. Finally a supply of generic invitations and matching envelopes were provided directly to the college registrar for last minute additions to the graduation roster.

The Trustees, President and Faculty

of

Premier University

are proud to announce that

Jane Doe

is a candidate for the degree of

BACHELOR OF ARTS & SCIENCES

awarded by the

College of Liberal Arts

You are invited to attend the ninety-third

COMMENCEMENT CEREMONY

Saturday, May Fifteen
Two Thousand and Ten
Ten o'clock in the morning

The results of this unique development effort were outstanding. The college received accolades from family, friends, and most importantly, new graduates - now alumni! Many of these new alumni framed the personalized invitations along with their diploma.

Providing graduates with personalized graduation announcements to be sent to family and friends is a small token of appreciation for their selection of your institution in the first place, and their perseverance in earning a college degree. It is a gesture that they will long remember as alumni. Above all, it's an important step in the cultivating of a positive relationship with future donors!

Premier Communications is a strong proponent of variable data printing, and our technology enhances the image of those colleges and universities with whom we partner. Our print technology has reached the point where each piece coming off one of our high resolution printers can be unique. Of course personalized graduation announcements are only one application of this advanced technology, which includes personalized admissions postcards, personalized college flyers and brochures, personalized recruitment HTML e-mails, personalized development solicitations, and … (use your imagination!).

Premier believes that the application of personalized printing technology to the alumni development area offers our clients a unique opportunity to develop and maintain close, personal relationships with your most important benefactors. We urge all of our clients to take full advantage of commencement as the beginning of this life-long relationship.

RE-EVALUATE POLICIES DURING TRYING ECONOMIC TIMES

John W. Dysart
President
The Dysart Group, Inc

The economic downturn has had a direct impact at colleges and universities. In many cases, enrollments are stagnant or have declined. Financial aid costs have risen as increased unemployment and market drops have fueled growth in aggregate financial need for both new and returning students. Colleges are dealing with more financial need while simultaneously experiencing cuts in state financial aid. Often, institutional resources are scarce as *(see Re-Evaluate Policies p.6)*

RE-EVALUATE POLICIES CONTINUED:

returns on endowed investments have been disappointing. These conditions are likely to persist for at least the near future.

- Perhaps the most important step institutional administrators can take is to re-evaluate their financial aid award policies. Are your packaging strategies structured in a manner that makes available the most aid to the most students?

- Calculate average and mean financial need over the last three years to determine how the economy has specifically affected your students.

- Determine changes in institutional expenditures for both merit/talent and need-based institutional aid. You may need to rebalance expenditure levels as a function of aid type based on the new economic realities.

- Institutional leaders may need to reconsider pricing strategies.

- Examine any changes in accounts receivable over the last three years. Ensure that perceived savings in financial aid costs are not just being transferred into increased student account balances.

- Business Offices may need to make changes in collection policies. If you are waiting until the end of each term to contact accounts in arrears, you are probably making a mistake.

- Believe it or not, now may be the time to make more exceptions and allow students and families even more time to catch up on outstanding balances. Decisions to be more aggressive in preventing students from enrolling in future terms due to balances will serve to increase overall attrition rates and deplete future revenue. It is definitely a balancing act and sometimes it makes more sense to increase the discount rates for some students to maintain enrollment levels, increase retention rates and generate needed revenue.

- Invest in your Financial Aid Office to allow for increased ability to provide proactive financial counseling early in the cycle.

- Expand payment plan options for your students and families. You might want to reduce or eliminate interest or enable payments to begin earlier in the cycle.

- Be more aggressive ensuring your students meet deadlines for state financial aid programs. Thousands of eligible students miss out on grant programs every year because they do not apply for financial aid in time to meet deadlines. Have your financial aid staff follow up systematically with all eligible students to make sure they are able to take advantage of available state funds.

- Is your Financial Aid office taking full advantage of some of the smaller federal programs like SMART grants and TEACH grants?

- The traditional financial aid appeal process may be insufficient to deal with the current economy. Sometimes, students deal with their inability to meet expenses by withdrawing rather than appealing their financial aid package. Institutional administrators may need to be more proactive in identifying possible appeals rather than waiting for the students to contact the Financial Aid Office.

- Better communication with administrators across campus can be beneficial. Make sure that coaches, faculty, student services professionals and others keep their eyes and ears open to identify struggling students.

It is easy to become complacent with collection and financial aid policies. We get used to conducting business a certain way and do not take the time to consider that policies that may have been appropriate over the last five years are no longer the best approach. Current economic conditions should force all colleges and universities to at least conduct a little research and at least entertain some changes in policy and process.

Questions for the New Year

- Are you on target to meet or exceed your new student enrollment goals for the coming year?

- Are you satisfied with your institutional discount rate?

- Do your scholarship and grant programs effectively attract and retain students?

- Is your recruitment operation generating a sufficient number of admission applications to allow for desired selectivity?

- Have your recruitment and financial aid strategies been adjusted or enhanced to address new economic realities?

The Dysart Group Inc. is a higher education consulting firm specializing in admissions, financial aid, retention and pricing at colleges and universities. We have worked with more than 150 colleges and universities throughout the United States and achieved extraordinary results.

The new year is the perfect time to conduct an enrollment audit.

THE DYSART GROUP, INC.
ENROLLMENT MANAGEMENT

The Dysart Group, Inc.
112 South Tryon Street, #760

Charlotte, NC 28284

Toll-Free (877) 9-DYSART (939-7278)

thedysartgroup@aol.com

www.thedysartgroup.com

Enrollment Manager

Dwyer Education Strategies, Inc.

210 North Church Street, # 2315

Charlotte, NC 28202

DWYEREDUCATION@AOL.COM

Mailing Address Line 1

Mailing Address Line 2

Mailing Address Line 3

Mailing Address Line 4

Mailing Address Line 5

The Dysart Group, Inc.
ENROLLMENT MANAGEMENT

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Tryon Plaza
112 South Tryon Street, Suite 760
Charlotte, NC 28284
Toll Free (877) 9-DYSART (939-7278)
www.thedysartgroup.com
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