Marketing Your Adult Education Program

Smart tips for planning, deploying and measuring

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Part 3 of 3
After reading this document, you will better understand:

- The four factors to examine in order to determine marketing mix
- Diversifying your marketing mix
- The roles of the marketing and admissions teams
- Measuring the performance of your marketing efforts

Summary of the two preceding white papers in our series

For many institutions, adult and distance education programs represent an uncharted – and sometimes, perplexing – new territory. On one hand, these programs are an opportunity for institutions to create another source of revenue – one that falls outside the realm of their traditional undergraduate enrollment. On the other hand, as with any brand-new endeavor, these programs come with their fair share of challenges. In the previous two installments of our white paper series, we shared rules of thumb and best practices to follow, as well as the pitfalls and missteps that every institution should avoid while embarking on this journey.

Our initial white paper explained how the demographics and psychographics of adult and distance learners should influence a number of different factors, including your enrollment marketing processes, the types of curricula and degree levels you offer, and even the structure of your admissions team.

In our second white paper, we explored why your admissions structure must be different to service your adult and distance education division. We suggested that you examine your present level of staffing and the daily responsibilities of your admissions representatives so you could adjust for possible increases in global or specific inquiries. And we made suggestions for how to gauge your team’s effectiveness.

Many institutions do not address these critical factors before launching their adult and distance education programs. In this paper, we explore one last crucial aspect to the success of your adult and distance learning programs: marketing. Like our previous white papers, student demographics and your approach in appealing to this audience plays a vital role in seeing your program through to success.
Introduction

The most fundamental aspect of a successful marketing plan is to understand your audience. No matter if it’s a product, service or, in this case, an education program you are marketing, you have to know how to speak the language of your prospective students, describe the benefits that they can derive from your offering and, ultimately, move them to take action.

In our two previous white papers, we explained how the differences between adult and distance learners create a need for your admissions team and practices to change. In this paper, we focus on how these essential differences also make a significant impact on your marketing efforts. We detail the best marketing strategies for promoting adult education programs in a digital age and provide an analysis to help you determine which advertising media will be most effective for your plan and when to deploy them. We also explain how to estimate inquiry yield by media for use by admissions and how to determine likely conversion percentages of media platforms for measuring ROI. Finally, we offer some guidelines for establishing a law of diminishing returns to improve the effectiveness of admissions-marketing collaboration in building a successful adult education program.
Four factors to examine in order to determine media marketing mix

When developing your marketing strategy, it is imperative to implement a mix of advertising media that work together to deliver the results you desire. In this digital age, everyone consumes media – deliberately or not – from countless places, which is why your strategy should create a greater chance of reaching them on their preferred media. An effective mix allows each medium to build upon another for maximum results – for example, a newspaper advertisement that drives readers to follow up for additional program information on your website. When developing marketing plans for your adult education programs, there are four factors you should examine in order to determine your media mix:

1) Location

• Geographic factors – The location of your institution and recruitment area are key in analyzing your marketing mix to determine what will make an impact and what won’t. For example, if your institution is in a Top 25 Designated Marketing Area (DMA) versus a smaller DMA, or even a rural area versus inner city, you will need to adjust your approach and media usage accordingly. Because of relative costs and competition, it may not make financial sense to advertise in traditional media, such as television, if you are located in a large metro area. It is also important to examine your location from the point of view of prospective students’ commutability in regards to both drive time and public transportation availability for on-campus classes. This can be more complex than it sounds, as you will need to take into account local traffic patterns and plot your media placement accordingly.

• Ground vs. online programs – The important adjustment to make between ground and online programs is where you spend your marketing budget to reach your desired prospective students. You will need to evaluate your marketing budget and determine the most effective media mix to use to get the inquiries you need. Use of the Internet theoretically grants you the ability to reach a national – or international – audience of students in search of distance programs. However, you will still likely want to consider geo-targeting your online audience to some degree when first rolling out a new online program. Unless your program is one of a kind, your initial prospects will most likely still be found regionally, within the natural reach of your school’s name recognition.

2) Programs and degree level

Which programs and degree levels are you offering, and how does that affect your use of media? Keeping in mind that undergraduate and graduate program audiences differ substantially by program area, here are a few examples for effective marketing mixes:

• Medical programs: In our experience, advertisements for medical-related programs tend to find success across media platforms because those programs are typically in demand. Since interest is relatively high, both responses to traditional media and to web traffic will likely be there for you to capitalize on. One tip: The more you can tie your traditional media use to website content that clearly defines the unique benefits of your programs, the better the possibility potential students will find your program offerings in keyterm searches on search engines.

• IT programs: On the contrary, advertising IT programs is generally more effective when focused on the Internet. Pay-per-click is an effective strategy, as well as creating and maintaining a top-of-the-line website. Remember that potential students interested in IT programs are going to judge your institution’s expertise in teaching IT based on the appearance and content of your website. Keep the content fresh and the user experience as seamless as possible.

• Business programs: As we have noted in our previous white papers, business programs are extremely competitive. So, to be successful, you’ll need to distinguish your programs as much as possible. The big players in the industry are spending so much on Internet advertising to market these programs that it is imperative to make sure your website is optimized for the keyterms you are bidding on. A sound SEO plan can help you maximize your inquiries for higher quality by tailoring your traffic, and responses, to specific keywords.
3) Competition

- **Level of competition** – As the popularity of adult and distance education continues to expand across the country, some markets are becoming saturated with competing institutions offering similar programs at comparable costs. If your institution is located in a saturated market, something you likely discovered in your initial business analysis, you already know that the key to your success in rolling out a new program is “distinctiveness.” In marketing, that means you should concentrate your advertising efforts on diversification – highlighting how the educational and cultural aspects of your institution, and/or your specific program, stand out. Your advertising efforts must concentrate on the educational and cultural advantages of your institution that make it stand out from competing institutions. Tradition, the outcomes of your academic programs, and the achievements of your most successful or recognizable alumni, especially as related to program area, are just a few aspects you can use to distinguish your institution in your advertising efforts.

- **Spend** – With careful analysis, it is possible to determine what your competitors are spending on advertising and marketing. Once you have reviewed their materials and determined the estimated amount of their spend, you need to make sure that you have at least an equal share of the market in each medium. If not, you are fighting a losing battle and you need to abandon that medium for another where you are able to establish a presence larger than the competition.

4) Cost-per-enrollment (CPE) goals

In our initial white paper, we noted that it was important to “begin with the end in mind.” CPE is the “end” with which you should begin. Once you set a realistic cost-per-enrollment, you can then determine your marketing mix and how much you should spend on each medium. Not all media will have the same CPE – it will generally be lower for the Internet, for instance – and each medium has its own law of diminishing returns. For example, if your institution sets its CPE at $2,500 and your Internet efforts are averaging $1,400 but not bringing you the number of students you need, you may need to look at other advertising media that will generate $3,000 CPEs, but help you reach your enrollment goals. In the end, your goal should be to match the initial $2,500 CPE that was originally set.

Given that a proper marketing mix involves media of various types, it’s important that your institution is aware of all available media and their efficacies.
Using an integrated approach to stand out

To say the least, the higher education landscape is competitive. This is particularly true in the adult and distance education marketplace, where for-profit schools have garnered the lion’s share of students looking for shorter term and flexible courses. To compete, your institution will need to implement an integrated marketing strategy. An integrated approach allows you to have frequency across media and to build brand awareness, as well as giving you the ability to maximize your inquiry volume. Implementing a media mix and tracking the results become the most crucial factors to developing long-term success.

It is valuable for an institution to work with an education partner that is actively participating and succeeding in the adult and online space. PlattForm offers nearly all media and marketing services in-house, so we can create a marketing mix that meets your budget demands and is fluid enough to reach your enrollment goals.

Analysis of available advertising media

To give you a better idea of the available media and the benefits (or downsides) of each, PlattForm has performed an analysis. The following chart will guide you through the selection process and help you choose the medium that will help maximize responses to your advertising efforts.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Marketing</th>
<th>Strengths</th>
<th>Weaknesses</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TELEVISION</td>
<td>Great for awareness and direct response advertisements. These efforts also allow institutions to geo-target or appeal to a national audience.</td>
<td>Very competitive, rising costs. Effective media placement and analysis can require professional assistance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RADIO</td>
<td>Great for pushing open houses or on-campus events - and it can influence the success of your other advertising media.</td>
<td>Difficult to directly attribute inquiries and/or measure results.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OUTDOOR/TRANSIT</td>
<td>Lots of bang for the buck over time in raising local or regional awareness. Can geo-target placements to coordinate with commuter patterns.</td>
<td>Difficult to directly attribute inquiries and/or measure results.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PUBLIC RELATIONS</td>
<td>Useful for raising awareness of both prospective students and general public.</td>
<td>Difficult to directly attribute inquiries and/or measure results. It's time intensive, as results usually show over a longer period of time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEARCH ENGINE OPTIMIZATION (SEO)</td>
<td>This is the most cost-effective source of inquiries that lead to enrollment.</td>
<td>Low lead volume. Best results typically come from an ongoing plan that is administered by SEO specialists.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAY-PER-CLICK MARKETING</td>
<td>Great conversions, good volume and ability to geo-target.</td>
<td>Time-consuming – this can be a 24/7 job. Best results come from working with interactive marketing experts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTERACTIVE RETARGETING</td>
<td>Useful for raising awareness and branding.</td>
<td>This medium hasn’t matured yet.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ONLINE DISPLAY</td>
<td>Useful for raising awareness and drives traffic to your best converting sources.</td>
<td>Difficult to directly attribute inquiries and/or measure results.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COST-PER-INQUIRY (Interactive Inquiry Generation)</td>
<td>Low cost-per-inquiry and generates significant volume.</td>
<td>Conversions are low; must have adequate staff to work the volume of inquiries.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DIRECT MAIL</td>
<td>Allows great targeting ability for both search and remarketing campaigns and remains a standard form of follow-up for specific stages of inquiry pools.</td>
<td>Results for search campaigns are declining while costs for paper and printing are rising.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EMAIL MARKETING</td>
<td>An excellent source for matriculation – use as part of your communication plan.</td>
<td>The science behind mail communication continues to change. Mapping out, deploying and measuring email campaigns can be very time-consuming.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRINT</td>
<td>As an advertising medium, it remains relatively inexpensive. Print ads can be geo-targeted to appeal to your prospects and can also drive Internet inquiry volume.</td>
<td>Larger metropolitan newspapers aren't generally effective and others are going out of business.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Advertising in the traditional sense of the word typically implies space that is bought and paid for. But for our purposes here, that definition does not necessarily need to be so concrete. In addition to the actual media types mentioned above, there are other approaches that can help your institution create a mix that maximizes responses from prospective students. This is where your admissions and marketing teams can work in unity.

- **Building a matriculation plan** – Remember that each program and degree level you offer will convert in a unique timeframe. When you combine this fact with a faltering economy and a reluctance among many adult learners to take on even more debt, these timeframes grow longer and longer. Building a matriculation plan with multiple touch points for walking the prospective student through the admissions funnel is key. Your students need to feel comfortable about their decision to enroll in your institution, and they want to know you care about their future.

- **Referrals** – Every institution should have a referral program in place. Your students are the greatest source of positive word-of-mouth for your institution. Why not put a system in place that allows them to spread the word about their experience, as well as allows your school the ability to follow up with a new crop of prospects who have heard wonderful things about your institution? Your referral program should request referral information from each student you interview. The question can be as straightforward as, “Do you know anyone else interested in pursuing a college education?” This approach creates some other positives as well. Generally, people tend to be more confident about completing their degree if they personally know someone else working toward the same goal. An added benefit is that your institution adds another enrollment without spending any dollars.

- **Business to business** – If you believe in the education your institution provides, and you are placing your students into positions with great outcomes, this approach will be easy. By creating relationships with local employers, you can expand your reach to the numerous companies in every market that will hire your graduates. You can also create the opportunity for these companies’ staffs to continue their education at your institution. For this effort to work effectively, we recommend dedicating a team to building these relationships, ideally involving a mix of people who have both admissions and marketing expertise.

- **Social media** – Your potential student audience is using social media to engage family, stay in touch with friends, and make buying decisions based on recommendations from their social network. To put it bluntly, your institution needs a social media presence to connect with this audience, not just for the purposes of generating inquiries, but also as a means of matriculation and, later on, retention. For example, Facebook updates allow you another touch point to stay connected with your prospects and keep them in the know about news, new programs, and other important happenings at your institution. Frequent updates will help your prospects feel connected to what’s happening at your institution on a daily basis. You can also use some of your other marketing efforts, including videos uploaded to YouTube or press releases, by posting those on social media as regular updates.

Fostering internal relationships is just as important as your external marketing efforts. Make sure your internal departments are collaborating and communicating.
Roles of the marketing and admissions teams

We all know that on many campuses, individual departments tend to operate in silos. But if your marketing efforts are going to reach their full potential, your marketing and admissions departments need to work hand in hand. Many institutions inevitably encounter a situation where marketing is working against admissions, and admissions is working against marketing. Instead, marketing should be informing admissions what initiatives they are leading, what sources are being used and any related limitations. Admissions should be offering feedback on the quality of prospects and the interviews they are leading. In other words, these departments need to collaborate.

Conflict resolution

There will come a time – if it hasn’t happened already – where the admissions department blames marketing for “junk” inquiries. The percentage of inquiries that are bogus in the grand scheme of things is generally low, but even a small percentage can be frustrating to an admissions representative. It is wise to educate your admissions team about your marketing efforts, including where and how inquiries are being generated. Then, hide the inquiry source. If an admissions representative begins to realize that a certain medium is difficult to work, they will not follow up on those inquiries at all, even though these may be your lowest CPE. Every inquiry should be dispositioned on the following results: if the prospect is not qualified, if the number provided is wrong, whether or not an interview is scheduled with the prospect, if the prospect is enrolled, and so on. This information needs to be shared with your marketing vendor, too, so they can gauge the effectiveness of their efforts and whether adjustments should be made.

Focus on results

In our previous white papers, we provided some suggestions for structuring your adult education admissions team in order to effectively respond to adult and distance learners. Now, we would like to add a caveat in regard to your strategy: Your admissions team needs to be built with a focus on the bottom line. Why is a financial perspective important? Simple. Because your focus needs to be on results. Before you begin building your team, you need to determine your cost-per-enrollment threshold. Ideally, your team has a solid understanding of reality and all internal parties agree on your goals – and also understand why this is key. We recommend that your institution measures the short-term and long-term results of your team and makes adjustments accordingly.
Summary

Over the course of three white papers, we have established that the most critical aspect to building a successful adult and distance education program is understanding your students. Every aspect of your efforts is affected by it, and you need to adjust your processes and expectations accordingly to appeal to and accommodate these learners.

Clearly, your audience plays an important factor in determining your marketing mix. Today’s world of constant media consumption and seemingly limitless entertainment and communication media hasn’t made the marketing process any easier. In fact, it is much more difficult. You have to know your audience’s media habits to ensure that you are putting your programs before the most likely potential students. A proper mix would allow each medium in which you advertise to build upon others. To help ensure your success, we presented you with four factors to determine what mix is appropriate for your institution and the programs it is offering. Our four factors were location, programs and degree level, competition, and enrollment goals. Each of these factors shapes who you reach, when you reach them and what they know about your institution (or your brand). Our analysis highlighted the pros and cons of the media that will help you develop an integrated marketing approach to maximize your results.

In addition to the media you can use to reach potential students, there are also less “concrete” marketing initiatives you can institute to help further your mix. Working in unison, your admissions and marketing teams can build a matriculation plan, institute an effective referral program, create relationships with local employers and utilize social media channels. The collaboration of your marketing and admissions teams is imperative since their efforts are directly related. We provided some examples of how your departments should work together to share information and adjust your marketing efforts and admissions processes as needed.

Your focus on the student needs to institute a business perspective as well to ensure that you achieve success.
You have given us significant feedback about the ideas we have shared, which we have appreciated and also incorporated. We hope that by following the tactics and best practices we have presented, you will see your programs through to long-term success. Best wishes from your higher education marketing partner.

Contact us today for more information about how PlattForm can help your institution experience success with its adult education program.