



WHITE PAPER

GENERATION Z AND PARENTAL INFLUENCE



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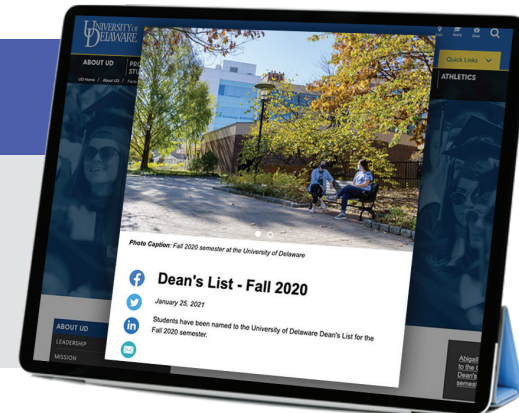
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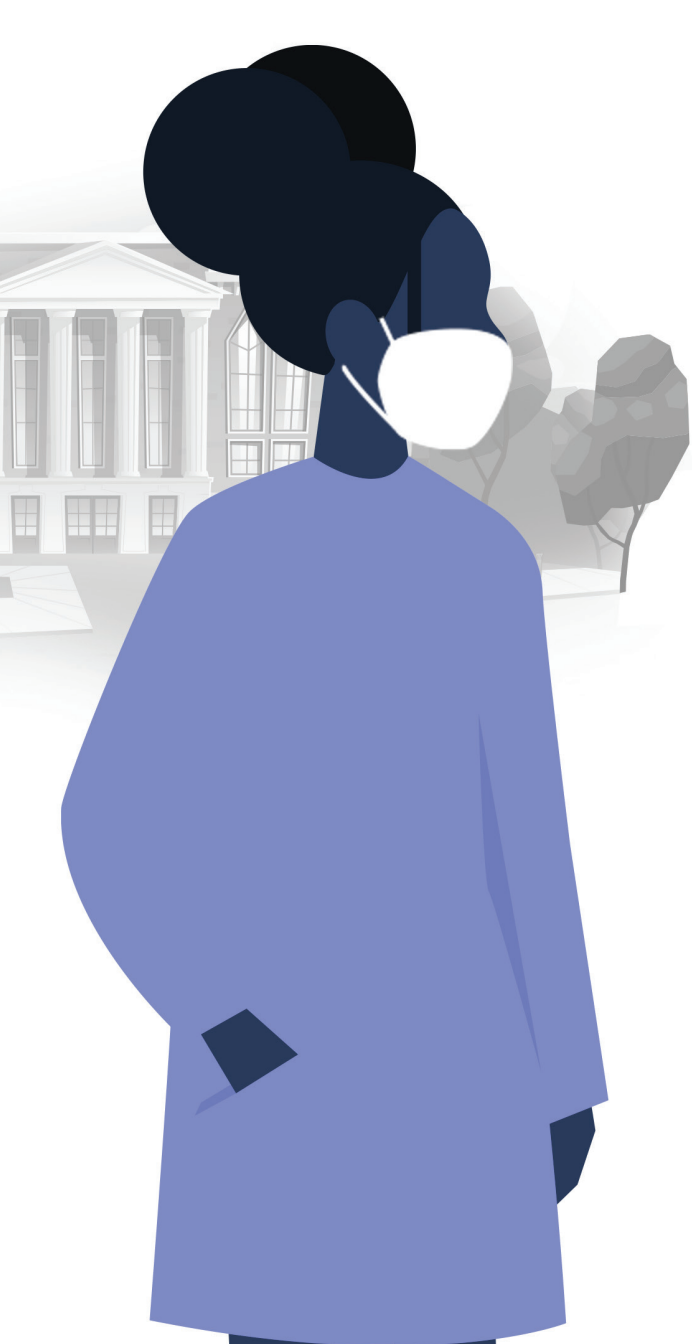
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FOREWORD

Even before the coronavirus pandemic began shuttering colleges and universities across America in mid-March 2020, the higher education industry had already faced challenges.

Shifting demographic trends and increased competition delivered a pre-pandemic punch that had clipped enrollment targets and resulted in smaller operating budgets for many institutions. For the handful of schools managing to escape those particular set of challenges, the turbulent times caused by COVID-19 have now pummeled them, too.

In addition to these ongoing threats, chief marketing and communication leaders continue to not only face mounting pressure to raise their school's brand profile, but also earn the trust of key constituencies. The need to gather, analyze, and report on metrics as a gauge of success has likewise gained traction within many marketing offices.

Meanwhile, social media has emerged as a prime source of information for students trying to learn about a school, while also serving as a common rallying spot for current supporters. For better—and sometimes for worse—families and friends share their perceptions online and have a role in shaping the attitudes of their followers.

In fact, research reveals that content published by these so-called “micro-influencers” holds even greater impact than content from celebrities who endorse certain brands.¹ Family influence extends to young members of Generation Z, digital natives whose online and offline lives are interchangeable.

This paper highlights the digital intersection of Generation Z and parental influence, with implications for today's higher education marketer. Tips are included to assist today's college marketing communicator in meeting this disruption head on through the alignment of key performance indicators and organizational objectives.

¹ Stackla. “Influence in the Digital Age.”



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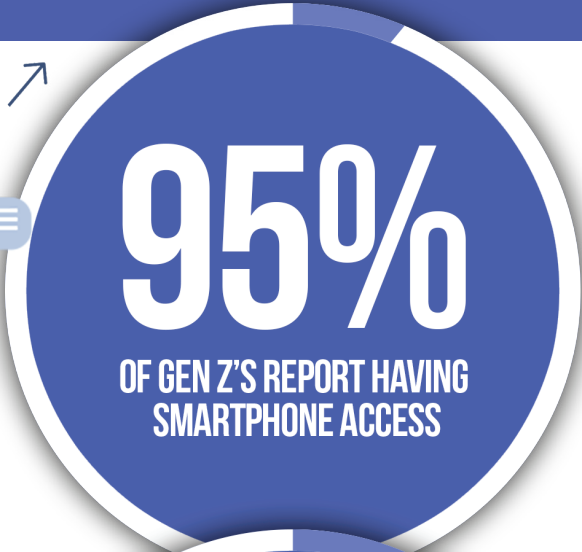
GENERATION Z: DIGITAL NATIVES WITH DIVERGING INTERESTS

Gen Z views college as establishing a career path and value authenticity and transparency.

Generation Z—defined by Pew Research as those born after 1997—represents a group whose members are the first with “no memory of the world as it existed before smartphones.”² Indeed, about 95% of Gen Z’s report having smartphone access, a 22-percentage-point increase from 2014-15, and smartphone ownership is almost universal regardless of gender, race, ethnicity or socioeconomic background.³

Nearly half (45%) report being “online constantly” and, as research demonstrates, the share of teenage girls who report being “near-constant online users” is much greater than their male counterparts. Hispanics also report significantly more use of the internet compared to their white counterparts.⁴

This heavy online activity translates to a nearly universal use of social media platforms among teens, most of whom view these platforms positively.⁵ Similar to Millennials, the majority of Gen Z members appreciate how social media delivers an efficient way to stay-in-touch with loved ones and the connectivity it provides in making new friends.⁶



² Pew Research Center. “On the Cusp of Adulthood.”
³ Pew Research Center. “Teens’ Social Media Technology.”
⁴ Ibid.
⁵ Pew Research Center. “Teens’ Social Media Habits.”
⁶ Ibid.



However, this generation diverges from its older Millennial counterparts in that its members are more likely to post about accomplishments rather than personal problems.⁷ Additionally, the consumption patterns of Gen Zers are manifested slightly differently than older generations. For example, Gen Zers prefer access to services over mere possession of goods, and they view consumption from the lens of how it reveals their self-identity.

The rise of the sharing economy is only one expression of this shift in consumer behavior. Digital platforms that enable access to services at lower cost (i.e. ride-hailing apps) hold special appeal to members of this group, as they are “seven times as likely to use these services as are those 65 and older.”⁸ For those considering a vehicle purchase, the preference for “smaller, more efficient and affordable” cars stands out in comparison to those once sought after by older generations.⁹ In short, Gen Zers are careful spenders.

This fact has far-reaching implications for college marketers across the U.S. since Gen Zers old enough to remember the Great Recession view college not so

much as an opportunity for self-reflection and intellectual growth as establishing a solid career path while accumulating as little debt as possible.¹⁰ Additionally, Gen Z prefers “brands that communicate with customers in an open, unfiltered way” and value the ideals of authenticity and transparency.¹¹ This generation tends to trust individuals more than big institutions, resulting in many brands focused on “partnering with social media influencers to appear more relatable.”¹²

The variety of technological advances coupled with the generational shifts just described has significantly altered the consumer landscape for all marketing communications professionals. The shifts extend beyond Gen Z and cut across socioeconomic levels, making “the emerging possibilities ... as transformational as they are challenging.”¹³

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Pew Research Center. “The New Digital Economy.”

⁹ CB Insights. “12 Industries That Will Thrive.”

¹⁰ Segran. “Guide to Gen Z.”

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ McKinsey&Company. “GenX and its implications.”



Here are a few key takeaways for 2021 and beyond:

Digital-First Strategy: A Framework For Success

The pandemic made it abundantly clear that the higher ed industry, as a whole, is a notorious digital laggard. It is incumbent upon college marketers to model how a digital-first strategy empowers institutions (even those whose primary target is not Gen Z students) to remain relevant. Traditional higher education marketing communication efforts, although still strategically important, should largely be subservient to digital tactics, whether allocating more to the purchase and proper utilization of SaaS platforms or making an investment in improving the digital literacy of the entire staff. Internal silos in which only a few marketing staff are knowledgeable about digital strategy—whether social media marketing, SEO or digital display ads—is a strategy the CMO/CCO can no longer afford. However, underlying all of these digital efforts must be the continual focus on elevating key stakeholders' experience with the brand.

Don't Be a Fake

It is not enough to just adopt a digital-first mindset. Online interactions (and offline, for that matter) that are lacking in humanity will miss the mark. Gen Zers excel at sniffing out attempts to “market” to them, and they value authenticity at deeper levels compared to nearly every generation before them. Anyone familiar with the book “Three and a Tree: How to Take Down Bad University Marketing One Cliché at a Time,” knows that the higher education industry is notorious for deriving branding inspiration from other schools. Smart marketers are uncovering, then consistently communicating through available channels, what it is about their school that is so unique and differentiated from the 4,000-plus colleges and universities available from which students might choose.

Adapt Quickly to Survive

Teens today have more computing power in the phone in their hands than most Fortune 500 companies once held in multimillion-dollar computer centers.¹⁴ Similar to how digital access and the 24-hour news cycle disrupted the newspaper industry, so too has an exponential world in which the past no longer predicts the future impacted higher ed. Students are browsing for connectivity and information 24/7. Annual marketing and communication plans must be worn as loosely fitting cloaks as digital marketing tactics across paid, owned, and earned media channels are re-evaluated on a weekly or even on a daily basis.

¹⁴ Collins. “Moore’s Law.”

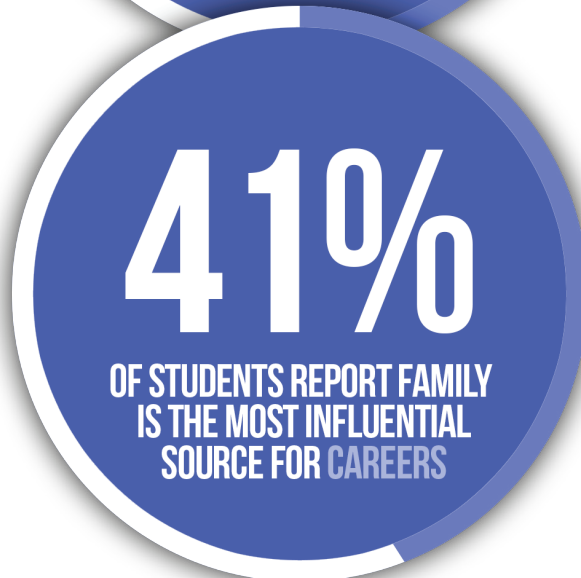
THE GREATEST INFLUENCERS: FAMILY MEMBERS

Friends and family recommendations supersede all other forms of advertising.

Social media and online content are today's go-to sources for trusted information, and recommendations from friends and family from social media channels now supersede all other forms of advertising.¹⁵ As a recent column for Inside Higher Ed pointedly stated, marketers seeking to grasp perceptions of their school's brand should "pay as much attention to online word of mouth as prospective students and parents do through social listening."¹⁶

Access to unlimited digital content makes clear that consumers, not companies, are "increasingly in control."¹⁷ For college and university marketers, the sheer pace and volume of technological changes requires a continual effort at relationship building with brand advocates via online channels, especially through shared and owned social media content. Branding success offline demands conversational and transparent communications tactics online as transactional messaging and content takes a back seat.

These new tactics extend to the college search process, since family members are often reported as the main influence for students' thinking about education after high school. According to recent federal studies, close to 50



percent of students report family members are their most influential source when thinking about education, and 41 percent say family members held the most influence regarding possible careers.¹⁸ With these numbers in mind, smart college marketers will want to know as much as possible about the influential family members responsible for raising Gen Z, primarily Generation X.

Gen X has steadily overtaken Boomers as the largest cohort of parents among today's teens.¹⁹ If Boomers were once considered "helicopter parents," then Gen X parents are "stealth fighters" who choose when and where to attack, depending on how important an issue is to them, according to best-selling author and generational expert, Neil Howe, who adds:

"When these Gen-X "security moms" and "committed dads" are fully roused, they can be even more attached, protective and interventionist than Boomers ever were. Web junkies, they will monitor Edline and Blackboard sites nightly, send emails to school board members, trade advice on blogs and look up teacher credentials. Flex workers, they will juggle schedules to monitor their kids' activities in person."²⁰

¹⁵ Emerick and Boudreaux. The Most Powerful Brand on Earth: How to Transform Teams, Empower Employees, Integrate Partners, and Mobilize Customers to Beat the Competition in Digital and Social Media

¹⁶ Gross. "The 'Goodnight' TikTok Meme and Perceptions of Higher Ed Brands."

¹⁷ Deloitte. "Digital Media Trends."

¹⁸ U.S. Department of Education. "Who Influences Educational Choices."

¹⁹ Howe. "Meet Mr. and Mrs. GenX."

²⁰ Ibid.

THE GREATEST INFLUENCERS: FAMILY MEMBERS



These parents will also “demand more than graduation and college enrollment rates” as they seek to understand “documented career outcomes and earnings capabilities of graduates five and 10 years down the road.”²¹

Gen Xers, who were born roughly between 1965 and 1980, carry their own weight when it comes to generational experiences with institutional disillusionment and distrust—after all, the oldest members of this group came of age during the dot-com bust and joined the first wave of peers whose parents divorced in droves. As adults, many saw their wealth greatly diminish during the Great Recession, taking a deeper hit than any other generation.²²

This generation is marked by disillusionment and distrust, with cynical attitudes toward advertising. That said, once a brand clears their high bar, Gen X is more loyal to it than other generations.²³ If a brand earns their trust, Gen X members are willing to pay for it. Similar to younger counterparts, Gen Xers desire more authentic contact from brands and to receive “things that are specially marketed to them” though they are not as easily compelled to try new brands compared to younger consumers.²⁴

In short, college marketers who desire to connect with potential Gen Z students must simultaneously find new and creative ways to authentically connect with their Gen X parents. Interestingly, even though three out of four parents report being “very involved” in the college search process, just slightly more than half of them say they are receiving targeted communications from colleges and universities.²⁵ To be successful moving forward, communications strategies must include this group of “enrollment influencers” who are key to reaching Gen Zers.

²¹ Ibid

²² Dulaney & Edwards. “Generation Stuck in the Middle.”

²³ Lamb. “Brand Loyalty in GenX.”

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ruffalo Noel Levitz. “2019 Parents’ Role in College Planning Report.”



A few key takeaways for 2021 and beyond:

All In The Family

The way brands communicate with customers has forever changed—especially in a post-pandemic universe. College marketers must focus on finding unique and creative ways to empower staff, faculty, alumni and family members who can advocate and produce content for the school’s brand in an integrated way. By embracing third-party endorsements from outside sources, such as parents or other family members, the marketer is tapping into one of the most powerful forces for raising a school’s profile and earning trust in the brand. Many colleges have figured out their own students are their best brand ambassadors; these micro-influencers offer the best chance of connecting authentically with the next class of recruits.

Gen X Marks The Spot

Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs) that treat Gen X parents as a secondary audience are missing a huge opportunity to reach, and engage, this influential group. After all, more than four in 10 Gen Xers stick to brands they like, according to an eMarketer study.²⁶ As detailed above, members of this group are the decision makers for the young Gen Z audience many traditional colleges are trying to engage. Gen X is the only generation to routinely consume advertising from both online and offline channels, but whichever way you choose to reach them, they’re worth the effort.

One More Time: Authenticity Matters

The experience of many Gen Xers has taught them to be skeptical of brand promises. However, once a Gen X connects with a brand message, they can be fiercely loyal. Spend time considering what messages will resonate with this group, but be sure the message reflects your values authentically. One way to share that message is through parent ambassadors who, similar to student ambassadors, are viewed as a trusted source when promoting your brand.

²⁶ Lamb. Ibid.

MAKING THE CASE

Make sure to select marketing metrics that are hitting your organization's targeted goals.

Metrics are not the same as data—understanding the difference should be a basic requirement of every member of the college marketing team. For example, what if the college posted a video on YouTube that received a million views on Giving Tuesday? What if it only resulted in eight donations averaging \$5 each? Depending on which metrics the team agreed matter most, the video was either a resounding success or a dismal failure. In this example, the team would probably concur that the time and effort to produce a video whose outcome netted only about \$40, while not a dismal failure, was far from successful. The assumption, of course, is that donations, not views, defined how successful a campaign was.

Carefully selected metrics were relevant even before the global pandemic of 2020, but it matters



even more moving forward as college marketing teams justify expenses to administration. The COVID-19 crisis merely accelerated that trend. Successful college marketers are able to demonstrate a connection between collecting the right data, marketing metrics, and hitting targeted goals. These data-informed marketers stand a greater chance of increasing (or at least maintaining) their marketing budget into 2021 and beyond, despite the financial blow dealt by the pandemic.

In the case of the aforementioned YouTube video, clearly a million eyeballs are a great way to draw attention to the college's brand. The impact of that—while much harder to quantify—is worth factoring into the team's definition of success. Still more appropriate measures might be return-on-investment (ROI) or conversion rates based on specific calls-to-action.

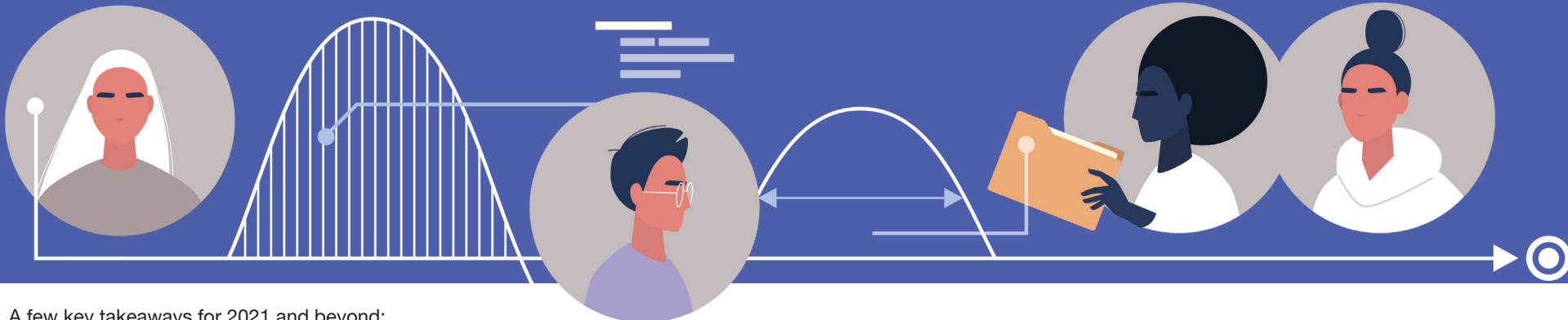


A template structured around the paid, owned, and earned media model that provides baseline measurements, as well as guidance concerning the key performance indicators (KPIs) of current and future campaigns provides one option for a college CMO, with dashboard metrics that stem from the organization’s strategies and objectives. The overarching marketing strategy will likely need to at least measure how the team can a) impact enrollment, b) heighten brand awareness, and c) do these activities in a more cost-efficient manner.

For higher education leaders who are still learning how to utilize a data marketing communications approach, an addendum follows that includes a proposal for 12 key metrics using the POEM model (four metrics each for Paid, Owned, and Earned Media Channels), along with the suggested platforms for gathering the data and the purpose for measuring it. Each college or university marketing communication team leader—whether CMO, CCO, or VP of Marketing

and Communications—would only pursue those that best address their specific situation.

Return on investment (ROI) is the essential metric. All others either lead to that return, or help manage the effort. The **average cost per conversion (CPC)** is a solid starting point to proving ROI. Evaluating average CPC (actual conversions and the cost of advertising to generate a specific action from a prospect)—whether it be completing a campus visit, an application or making a final deposit for enrollment—should enable marketing to tie more directly to the college’s bottom line. Only when marketing is able to establish how it impacted student recruitment and contributed to revenue goals in as cost efficient a manner as possible, might it make headway in being seen as a contributor to the profit margin, rather than a loss. Proving ROI will likely be a college marketers’ best assurance of generating additional funding moving forward.



A few key takeaways for 2021 and beyond:

Bust Silos Or Suffer

Your school's CRM tool may be among the best, but if the VP of Enrollment is not consistently sharing the insights the platform reveals, then deep and lasting success may prove more elusive than necessary. It is highly advisable that any available marketing metrics be augmented with relevant metrics from other administrative divisions (Business, Enrollment, Advancement, etc.). For example, the college might investigate how Google Analytics allows actual values from an online payment gateway to be fully integrated into analytics dashboards and reports. In addition, even if SEO, website improvements, Google AdWords, and targeted email campaigns have begun across campus, when campaigns lack consistency in messaging or fail to coordinate, the colleges' overall marketing effectiveness is negligible.

It's Lack Of Leadership, Not Data

Often, lack of data is not the issue, but how to make best use of it. For this reason—all metrics, whether paid, owned or earned—must strike a balance between measuring specific sets of actions/behaviors desired by the College (i.e. visits, applications), while also measuring the costs associated with nurturing, engaging and driving awareness in those leads. Additionally, top leadership across the college or university must be willing to contribute to a culture curious about what their data reveals and then act on it to further refine the college's strategy. Every division head, and certainly the chief marketing officer, should have a fundamental understanding of the difference between first, second, and third-party data, and the implications of each, while also respecting threats to data security—not only for the institution, but for primary audiences (students, faculty, staff, alumni, and other stakeholders).

Test And Measure

Ongoing evaluation of available metrics makes optimization possible, which positively impacts marketing strategy and the bottom line. For example, what impact on bounce rate would occur if slight design changes were made to the homepage (i.e.: switching out certain images at the top or more prominently placing major event links with a call to action to "read more")? Will traffic to the website increase if the school's social media utilizes more video? Are certain types of stories showing greater click-through rates in newsletter campaigns? How will the addition of a student "brand ambassador" program impact social mentions or sentiment, and how can the college incorporate into its own practices what it observes to be clearly engaging content generated by its young ambassadors? Testing and answering myriads of questions such as these is invaluable to the marketing team and administration.

CONCLUSION

The global pandemic has shaken much of higher education to its roots and exposed serious systemic threats underneath its foundation. However, as with every crisis, there are corresponding opportunities for marketers to capitalize on.

The primary threat highlighted the need for a robust, data-informed marketing strategy and digital expertise—or be left behind. The opportunity exists, however, in the ability to transition to a mindset that is as much like a Chief Digital Officer as a Chief Marketing Officer. Partner with other division heads across campus to bust data silos, re-evaluate the wealth of first-party data already available, and demonstrate how a digital-first strategy will empower the institution.

Another threat stems from a failure to realize how segmented audiences have become. On the other hand, opportunities abound for the CMO who understands the unique areas of overlap between Gen Z and their Gen X parents. A carefully crafted social media content strategy

that includes the right analytics strategy will result in higher engagement rates with both Gen Zers and Gen Xers, while also providing data to help determine which content is making crucial connections and which is not. Colleges must leverage their existing assets to tell the kinds of authentic, personalized stories that activate brand ambassadorship at the family level. Strategies that include measurable and repeatable tactics will reveal marketing return-on-investment, help to meet organizational objectives, and establish marketing teams as trusted advisors. Merit is the kind of platform that does that for hundreds of colleges now.

The pandemic upended the higher education sector, already ripe for disruption, and the competition is expected to only intensify in the years ahead. Marketing and communications teams are a vital asset to their colleges and universities, as never before. Now is the time to step up with the strategies and metrics to prove it.



Paid Metrics

Average Click Through Rate (CTR)

Tool: Google Analytics

CTR measures the percentage of total impressions resulting in a click on search or display advertising. The college should put clicks in context and consider the quality of imagery, keywords and positioning of any digital ad. Industry averages are also an important consideration—the newly updated industry specific benchmark for jobs and education is 4.15% for search ads and .38% for display ads (Quick, 2020).

Engagement

Tool: Facebook Analytics (or other specific platform analytics)

Engagement measures how well promoted posts engage potential students, parents and alumni, by measuring specific actions (i.e. “likes” and shares). Clicks on an event registration link or shares that spread word about the event, for example, could indicate whether the content was compelling enough to encourage engagement with the brand.

Average Cost Per Conversion (CPC)

Tool: Google Analytics (or other similar platform)

The Average CPC will measure costs associated with conversions from specific paid campaigns. College marketing will want to monitor actual conversions which could tie to the bottom line, such as a completed application or a completed enrollment deposit, and the associated costs.

Pay Per Click (PPC)

Tool: Google Analytics (or similar)

The PPC will measure ad click costs paid to drive website visits. When marketing is paying \$40+ per click for keywords (i.e. “business degree”), it should be routinely evaluated to ensure the click is worth the money being paid, or consider shifting to less expensive options, perhaps using another search engine (Bing) or earned media placements instead.

Owned Metrics

Bounce Rate

Tool: Google Analytics (or similar)

The Bounce Rate measures the percentage of visits to only one page before the visitor exits the school website, which is the school's top marketing tool for reaching prospective students. A high bounce rate from the homepage could indicate a student did not find the content engaging enough to link to other pages. On the other hand, if a marketing landing page is created, a high bounce rate could indicate the visitor has gotten exactly what he or she came for; the college will want to monitor and make appropriate adjustments.

Pages Per Session

Tool: Google Analytics (or similar)

Pages Per Session will measure how people engage with web content. Similar to bounce rates, a higher page per session indicates prospective students are clicking through on a CTA or a link to another post on the website; this has the potential to nurture them towards enrollment (or at least taking another action such as applying to the school or visiting campus).

Traffic Sources

Tool: Google Analytics (or similar)

Traffic Sources are useful in understanding what traffic is driving the most visits to the school's website. Measuring how many visitors access the site from various sources can assist in not only measuring SEO performance, but also where changes might be needed. For example, if traffic from social media is low, spending time on content published on social platforms might be warranted.

Conversion Rate

Tool: Google Analytics (or similar)

Conversion Rates measure the campaign success of a specific goal, such as when a potential student clicks on the “visit campus” icon and fills out the form, creating a potential lead. School's will want to monitor the experience with the website; a low conversion rate could mark a problem with the marketing strategy, such as a poorly designed page or weak call to action.

Earned Metrics

Social Mentions

Tool: The college's main social media platforms are useful, but consideration should also be given to other SaaS platforms. One great **example is Merit**, a distribution platform that efficiently issues announcements about student achievements that are shareable on the student's social media accounts. By measuring mentions, keywords, hashtags and other ways that the College comes up in social conversations, marketing might jump into a conversation and help the brand in real time. Identifying those who engage with the brand helps build an audience and create personas for future marketing.

Sentiment

Tool: There are several platforms that perform sentiment analysis, some much more expensive than others. The point is to find a way to measure.

Sentiment is measured to help gauge the overall tone of social media posts and traditional media by looking at the ratio of positive to negative posts. Doing so will not only help ensure the overall attitude toward the brand is positive, but will also help mitigate any negative posts so the brand reputation remains largely intact.

EMV

Tool: Merit, Cision, Meltwater, Muckrack

Earned Media Value helps to measure the value of all social marketing activities and how such interactions contribute to the overall value of marketing efforts. For example, if a college is in the early phases of a student brand ambassadors program, using students' own social media handles to promote the school, then the EMV provides a quantifiable metric to determine the impact.

Reach

Tool: In addition to the school's social media platforms there are others that can help measure both social and traditional media such as those named above.

Reach is important because the marketing team will want to know the number of people who have reportedly seen the school's messaging or at least been exposed to the brand. Much will depend on what the leadership is interested in and whether this KPI can be used to show an effect on overall objectives and strategies for the college or university.

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Keli Jacobi has devoted more than a decade to higher education marketing and communications, managing projects and content across platforms, while also learning how data-informed decisions can guide teams to become more strategic.

She started as a news reporter covering a range of higher ed and other issues, earning numerous writing awards along the way. She holds an M.S. in Data Marketing Communications from West Virginia University and a M.A. in History from the University of Louisiana at Monroe, where she wrote her thesis on the first female elected to the U.S. Senate.

Today, she serves as APR Chair (Accreditation in Public Relations) for the Arkansas Chapter of the Public Relations Society of America.

About Merit

Merit helps you efficiently recognize, award, and empower your students for their triumphs during their time at your institution and share that message with the audiences that matter most to them and you.

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