

ARTICLE



Innovative Strategies for a Budget-Savvy Student Search

Many of us have been there—our enrollment budgets get cut or do not increase, but we are still expected to enroll the same or even an increasing number of students. As more colleges and universities tighten their budgets, admission offices are increasingly expected to do more with less. Therefore, we need smarter and more efficient recruitment solutions that are also budget-friendly.

Student search does not have to break your already tight recruiting budget. There are many economical strategies that you can employ while maintaining a high-impact student search. Consider the following effective, yet low-cost strategies you can utilize in your next student search.

BE STRATEGIC WITH NAME BUYS

Purchasing an effectively targeted student list is one of the most critical components of a successful search. However, purchased student names can also be one of the most expensive components of search. So, you'll want to be very strategic with name buys when on a tight budget.

It is important to regularly review past search purchasing parameters and examine your enrolled student file along other internal and external data to identify the list type and criteria that will give you the most qualified leads. You should rely on the expertise of your search provider to study your previous search campaigns and other data to create maximum value for your recruiting dollars. A comprehensive list analysis can help you:

1. **Understand the discrete target markets in which you have had past success;**
2. **Identify sub-markets you might reduce or eliminate within your search parameters that did not yield enrollments;**



Students don't all take the same tests, so by using multiple list vendors, you can get deeper penetration into your target markets and, thus, have a more effective search.

3. **Responsibly and tactically expand your geographic territory using test markets; and**
4. **Find ways to reduce or redistribute list-purchasing costs for maximum return on investment.**

EXPLORE ADDITIONAL NAME SOURCES

Consider purchasing from multiple list vendors, such as NRCCUA, College Board, and ACT. Students don't all take the same tests, so by using multiple list vendors, you can get deeper penetration into your target markets and, thus, have a more effective search. Nevertheless, list vendors, such as NRCCUA and College Board, are not the only sources of search names. There are several additional resources that you may have access to because you are a member of certain organizations and potentially have a subscription to their services. Many of these names may be free for your institution. For instance, you may have access to names of Sage scholars, College Bound students, or National Merit Scholarship semi-finalists to add to your search. If your institution is religiously affiliated, you may make use of student names from churches or youth pastors within your denomination. If you use Zinch, Cappex, and other alternative name sources, you may want to consider adding inquiries from these sources to your senior search that you have generated in your annual subscription.

CAREFULLY CONSIDER THE TIMING OF YOUR SEARCH

Buying your search names at the right time can also make your search dollars a better investment. Along with buying names throughout the year, you'll want to be first-on-the-block with your search messaging. The strategy of buying names as soon as they are available and launching search campaigns several times throughout the year will give you improved overall response rates, resulting in better return on investment. Institutions consistently report higher response rates with timely search campaigns. However, many colleges and universities do a one-time buy, thereby missing out on the opportunity to continually build their inquiry and applicant pools throughout the year as names become available.

RE-SEARCH QUALIFIED SECRET SHOPPERS AND OTHER NON-RESPONDERS

Some colleges and universities search purchased names only once. If the student does not respond in the first campaign, they purge the non-responder names. Since you have already purchased these names, you could glean additional value from this investment by conducting a second-chance search for select secret shoppers and qualified non-responders.

Perhaps when you conducted your initial inquiry search campaign, these students were not ready to explore college options or had too many other universities competing for their attention. In the case of many secret shoppers, they may be very interested in your institution but prefer to stay under the radar and do not "raise their hands" to let you know you have their attention.



You may find that engaging these stealthy non-responders on a regular basis is an effective way to increase inquiries and applications.

When re-searching a student list, be sure to use new, compelling content to get them to inquire or apply—whether it be to find out about an early scholarship offer, invite them to a campus event or open house, or receive a material that may guide them in their selection process. To save on costs, you may elect an electronic-only strategy or a modified print strategy for only the most qualified non-responders.

DEVELOP A COST-EFFICIENT PRINT STRATEGY

Print is an expensive component of student search, yet it remains a very effective one. Your print components can have a significant impact on the total number of responses and even drive increases in electronic responses. We often see 30 to 40 percent of responses from a search campaign can result from one strategically planned, well-written, and designed print piece, and that percentage increases with additional print components.

Nevertheless, keep in mind that you do not have to send each print component to all students. For some categories of students in your search, you may even consider an email-only strategy. It is important to develop an effective method of qualifying your names so that you can determine who receives which print components and who may not be mailed print pieces at all.

Student search predictive modeling can be effective in identifying the most qualified names at the purchase stage and for sorting students into groups that receive both print and electronic communications or electronic-only communications. Just keep in mind that predictive modeling can be expensive and time-consuming. Some vendors charge a premium for predictive models. The value of your investment in a predictive model increases with the number of names you purchase because it spreads the modeling cost over a larger number of names.

Another way to save precious recruiting dollars is by utilizing a print-on-demand strategy.

Think about it: how many hundreds of old viewbooks, brochures, and postcards do you have in your cabinets that you have already paid for but never used? By moving to a print-on-demand strategy, you'll print only the amount of materials you need at the time and you can customize the messaging in those pieces as the year progresses.

BE SURE TO HAVE AN EFFECTIVE FULFILLMENT STRATEGY

When on a tight budget, it may be tempting to skip fulfillment to save a few dollars. However, that is a short-sided approach since fulfillment is a vital component of an effective student search campaign. It is critical to respond to inquirers quickly while their interest in your institution is strong. While student search is important, sending those first response messages in a timely



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manner is equally essential to maintain your prospective students' interest. Your fulfillment not only has to be fast, but it also needs to compel the inquirer to take the next steps of visiting and applying. So, your messaging should be geared towards engaging students with personalized information specifically related to their interests.

There are several different types of student search fulfillment that are both effective and budget friendly:

1. **Immediate Email Fulfillment:** After students have inquired or applied to your institution using a pre-populated inquiry form or application, they should receive a customized, tailored email confirming receipt of their form or application within an hour of receipt. These emails should be strategically written to move students to the next step in the enrollment cycle with a custom look that compliments your student search and marketing materials.
2. **Additional Electronic Fulfillment:** In addition to the immediate email confirmation, additional electronic messages can be sent over several weeks to continue to engage these students and encourage them to move to next phase of the cycle in a cost effective manner.
3. **PDF Fulfillment Brochures:** Fulfillment brochures offer an additional incentive for students to complete the inquiry form and an opportunity to become more engaged with your institution. National research shows that incentive brochures are effective and significantly increase response rates. Printed brochures are costly, but a PDF version of a fulfillment brochure is a cost effective alternative that still provides high response rates.

Many schools just don't have the staff, facilities, or technology to provide timely responses to new inquirers. If this is the case at your institution, you should seriously consider using an outside firm for your initial fulfillment.

GET THE BEST POSTAGE RATES AND SERVICES

Postage is another area of search that can add significant and sometimes unpredictable costs. One strategy that can help reign in postage costs is to create mock-ups with the exact paper and envelope weight and size, take them to post office, and obtain the per piece postage price. Then, depending on the price, you may consider tweaking paper quality or size to lower your postage costs. It is not just the weight, but also the dimensions that determines postage. So, if you change the size or weight slightly, you may save a significant amount on your postage costs.

In addition, make sure your search firm is a certified U.S. Postal Service vendor. If so, they can CASS (Coding Accuracy Support System) certify your mailing list. What this means to you is that each name and address will be verified with the USPS, so mailings are processed through the less expensive USPS automation mailing process and they are more likely to get delivered. This service can save you a substantial amount of money on postage. In addition, make sure your vendor uses the National Change of Address (NCOA) system to provide the latest official mailing address for prospective students. Finally, if a significant number of your print pieces are going to the same zip codes within



a metropolitan area, it could pay to use a firm that has the ability to deliver your mailings to sectional facilities. The advantage of this approach is that your print components will be delivered to households faster and more consistently without additional costs.

CONSIDER REDUCING SECONDARY TRAVEL AND SHIFT FUNDS TO SEARCH

In the last few years, many colleges and universities have reported that high school visits have become less effective as a source of new inquiries in certain markets. Thus, many forward thinking institutions have conducted an analysis of their institution's visit outcomes and have strategically reduced travel to some secondary markets. They have subsequently shifted some travel funds towards the purchase of names in those territories. Then, after an effective search, they have held regional events and promoted campus visits to drive applications.

WHAT NOT TO SKIP WHEN ON A TIGHT BUDGET

Skimping on Names

One of the most common ways colleges and universities trying to save money on search employ is simply to buy fewer names. A more savvy strategy, however, is to have an experienced firm conduct list analysis to tighten purchasing parameters and markets. That way you can buy smarter and may even be able to buy fewer names with the same or better results. While you may be able to reduce your name buy costs with this approach, you still need to buy enough names to build a robust inquiry or applicant pool. If you buy too few names, the impact is so little that it will not be worth the money invested to develop the student search campaign.

Not Having Print

When on a tight budget, it may be tempting to skip having a print component since it one of the most expensive parts of student search. However, print is an important part of search and can have a significant impact on the total number of responses and even drives electronic responses. A smarter approach is to develop a print/no-print strategy for different groups of students.

Eliminating Fulfillment

It can also be initially appealing to eliminate the cost of a custom fulfillment brochure to search respondents. However, research shows that it is critical to provide an immediate response to keep students engaged in your institution. Further, electronic fulfillment options are not costly and provide a variety of fulfillment options.



Trying to Go it Alone

You may try to save a few dollars by conducting a student search on your own, but partnering with an experienced search firm pays dividends in the end. Over the years, student search has become so complex that enrollment firms offer more value than ever before. By partnering with a veteran search vendor, you will benefit from a team of experts dedicated to your student search, years of experience knowing what works and what doesn't in student search, award-winning design and copywriting specialists, and a high level of quality control.



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kathleen Cross, Ph.D. serves as Executive Vice President of KelmscottEDU, a nationally recognized higher education enrollment consulting and marketing firm, where she leads consulting, strategy, and marketing. With experience working in both U.S. and international universities, Kathleen is a former Vice President of Enrollment, Chief Technology Officer, and Dean of Studies Abroad.

Serving 500+ higher education institutions over the years, Kathleen's approach is to create authentic experiences that engage and inspire the audience combined with innovative and proven data-driven strategy.

Kathleen holds a doctoral degree in Higher Education Administration from Saint Louis University along with a bachelor's degree from Saint Louis University and master's degrees from the University of Cincinnati and California State University. Kathleen also serves as a professor in the Higher Education Administration Graduate Program at Bay Path University. She is a frequent national speaker and published author.

She has additional experience in corporate and healthcare organizations as a former bilingual Speech-Language Pathologist and former director and part-owner of successful medical device/technology company. She has lived in several countries and fluent or proficient in multiple languages.



ABOUT KELMSCOTTEDU

KelmscottEDU is a privately owned, full-service communications and marketing solutions provider for the higher education market. Founded in 1936, our headquarters houses, a team of enrollment and marketing strategy experts, an award-winning graphic design and copywriting department, an e-business technology center, sophisticated printing operations, and mail and fulfillment operations—assuring you quality control, lower costs and fast, effective results.

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