

ENROLLMENT MARKETING IN THE PANDEMIC

How to get the most out of your digital marketing in
the new age of student recruitment

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Introduction

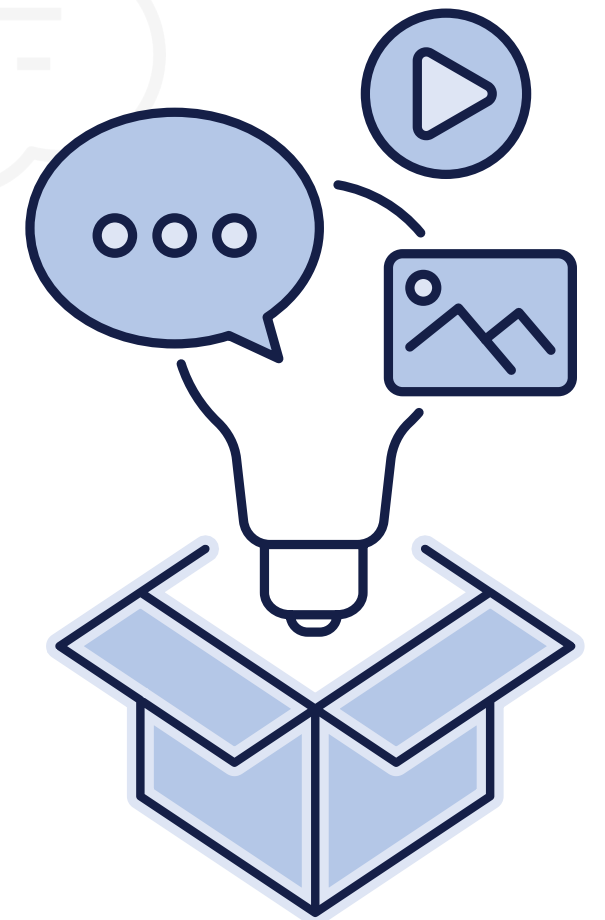
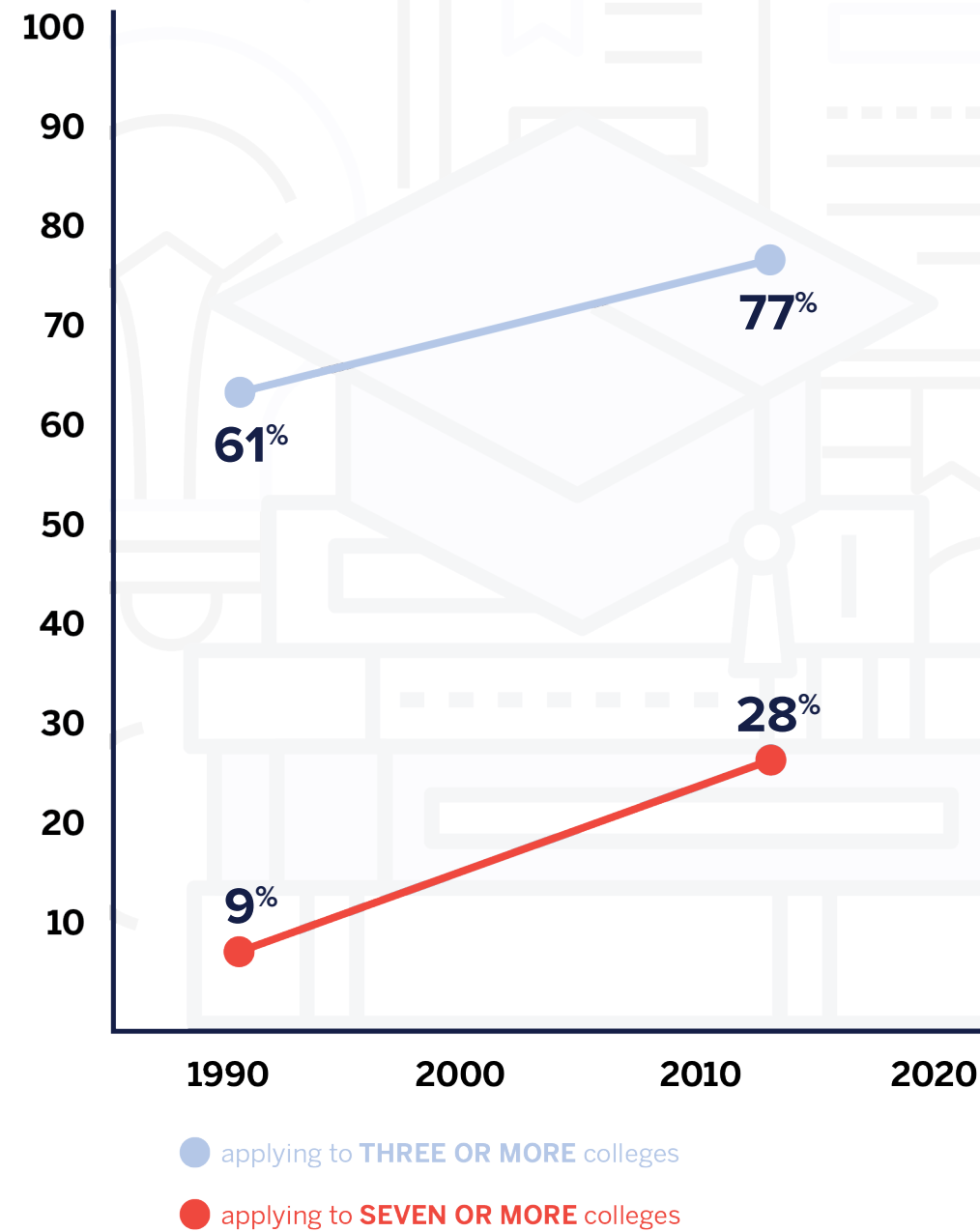
Recruitment is a key part of the college admissions process. Although a large percentage of all college decisions come as a result of personal recommendations, a growing number of students rely on college marketing efforts to help them solidify their final college choice.

Between 1990 and 2012, the number of students applying to seven or more colleges increased from 9 to 28 percent. Those applying to three or more colleges moved from 61 to 77 percent.⁷

Students have more options than ever before and luckily, most parents and students begin researching postsecondary education options long before the end of the senior year rolls around.

As the world experiences a large-scale shutdown as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, college officials are left scratching their heads. How can colleges, who have traditionally relied on word-of-mouth and direct sales via campus tours, possibly expect to recruit students in a time like this?

The secret to college recruitment at a challenging time like this lies in the ability of college recruitment officers to think outside the box - and to harness the power of digital marketing.



The “Traditional” Pathway to College Enrollment

Although each new decade (arguably each new year) brings with it the advent of new recruitment technologies and techniques, the so-called “traditional” pathway to college enrollment has been relatively straightforward.

There have been some changes in recent years as digital resources become more commonplace. These shifts are likely to become more pronounced during this unique period of history, too.

EARLY INQUIRY PHASE

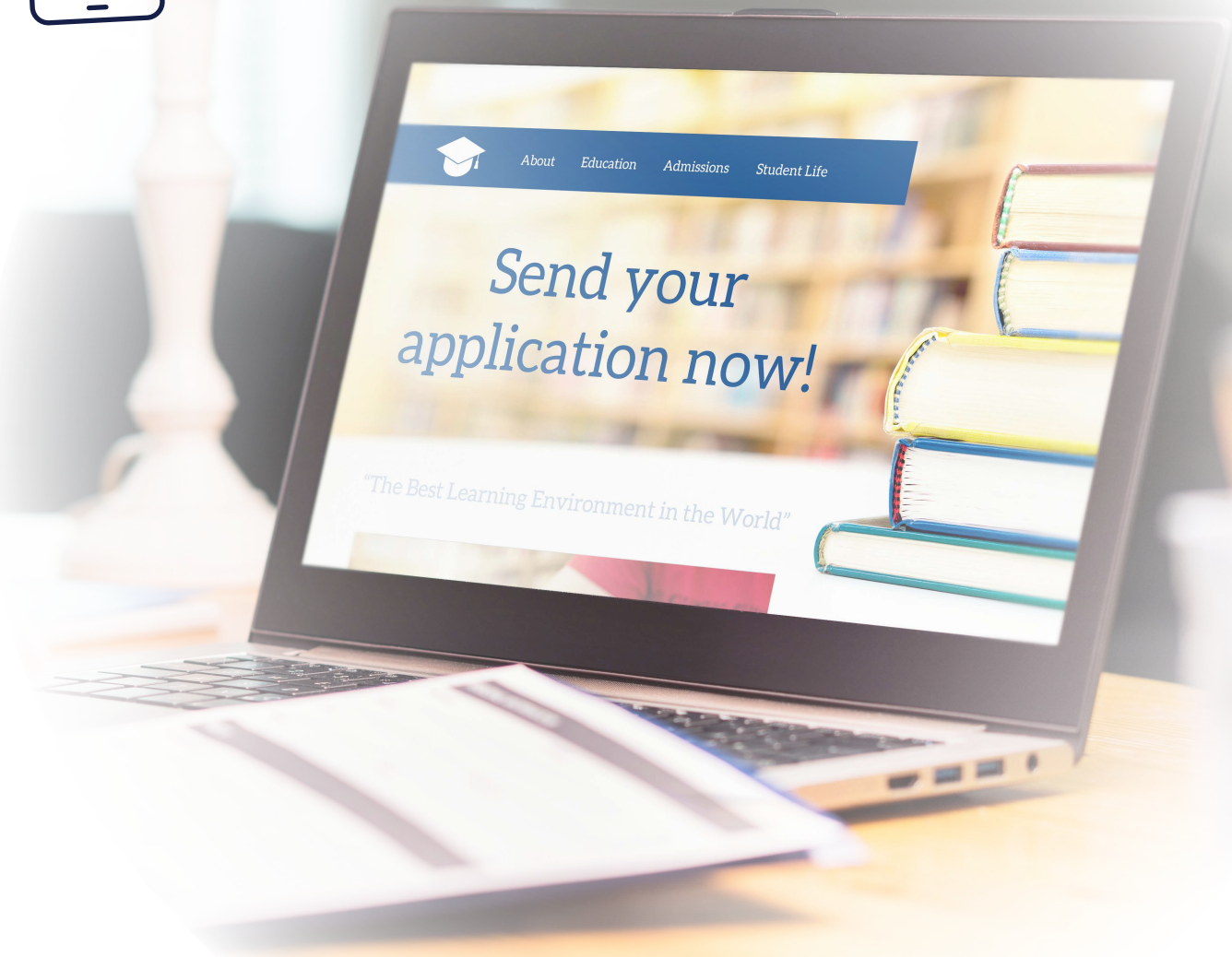
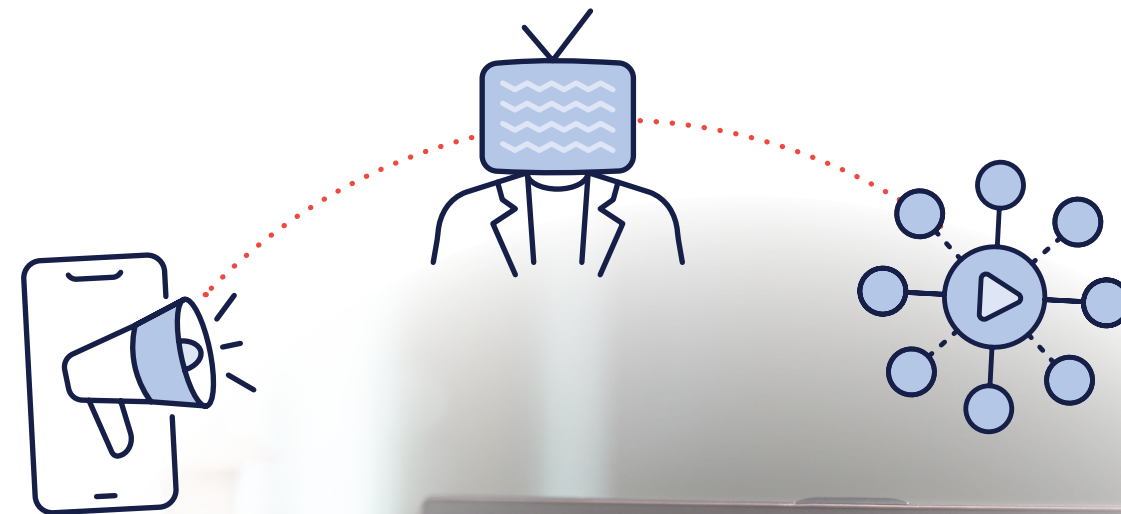
Starting as early as before the freshman year, college recruitment officers begin to reach out to students who are in the beginning stages of looking for a college. Often, these inquiries are captured inadvertently when students provide their information on materials like the pre-ACT or the ASVAB examinations.

Many of these inquiries never make it through the rest of the funnel. This can be the result of a number of factors including:

- A change in future plans (be it a changed major or a decision to not attend college at all)
- Updated or incorrectly gathered contact information
- Lack of interest and engagement with the college

Because the inquiry stage is a very early predictor of how many students will enroll at a college, the goal of most college recruitment officers is to reel in and collect as many inquiries as possible.¹ These can be collected through a college website form, a response to direct mail, a scheduled campus visit, and so on.

The tactics that work best at the inquiry stage tend to be a bit flashier and less practically oriented than what will be successful later on. Recruitment officers might use social media or vibrant digital displays to entice students into learning more.



INQUIRY TO APPLICANT CONVERSION

Later, generally sometime between the beginning of the junior year and the middle of the senior year, the process of inquiry to applicant conversion begins. Once inquiries are captured, they must be converted to applications.

The primary goal of a college recruitment officer at this point is to encourage students to fill out and complete all required steps of an application. While in the past these words of encouragement were generally provided via direct mail or phone call, those methods are not as effective as they once were.

Instead, modern recruitment officers tend to see more success with using methods like text messaging, emailing (less effective), content marketing, SEM, and social media prompt prompting.



ACCEPTANCE

The funnel narrows even more as students move into the acceptance stage of the application process. As more students apply to an increasingly large number of colleges, this stage has become even more crucial. In the past, a college recruitment officer could feel relatively confident in knowing that a student would attend if admitted. Now the odds are less favorable.

During this stage, tactics like email and content marketing are particularly effective. The more targeted and personalized the approach, the better.

It's at this stage where the power of the campus visit comes into play. There's nothing quite like a university's trademark football game or illustrious beachside campus to capture a student's interest for life.

ENROLLMENT

Many novice recruitment officers assume that the hard work ends after a student has been accepted and submitted his tuition deposit to attend in the fall. That's not the case. As students ponder more potential choices, the likelihood of "defaulting" on that payment becomes even higher.

During the period between confirmation of enrollment and when a student actually steps foot on campus, a college recruitment officer should be working hard, through email marketing and social media, to keep that student engaged.

The Impact of COVID-19 on College Enrollment

Without a doubt, the COVID-19 pandemic has put college recruitment - which was already facing its own challenges to begin with - into a tailspin. As campuses shut down and recruitment officers are forced to work from home, a new age of digital marketing must be explored.

There are several key areas that are heavily impacted by these changes.

INTERNATIONAL ADMISSIONS AND ATHLETICS

International admissions is one area of enrollment that will be particularly affected by the pandemic. Since the United States has banned travel from a variety of countries, it will be more difficult for students to visit and enroll if they are from other countries. Many sites for tests like the TOEFL have also been closed.

This is particularly challenging, as many colleges rely on international students (who tend to pay full tuition) to offset other costs.²

College athletic recruiters, too, are at a loss, as spring generally is a time to solidify offers for scholarships. With no events on the horizon at which to scout, college athletics may need to rely on alternative methods of recruitment, too.

GRADING AND ADMISSION

One of the most obvious impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic has been nationwide

school closures and a free-for-all when it comes to how schools administer grades. Despite a need for equity in access⁸, there will no doubt be concerns about how students will be measured against each other when it comes to college admissions.

CAMPUS VISITS

The spring and early summer are crucial times for college recruitment officers who are seeking to both lock in students on the edge about their decision to attend as well as new prospective students. Those visits simply aren't going to happen in 2020.

Most colleges rely on being able to showcase their best assets at admitted students' days and open houses that take place in the spring. Without those visits, marketing becomes a much more difficult and strategic endeavor.



Proven Recruitment Strategies for the Digital Age

Although college recruitment officers may find themselves frustrated by the lack of face-to-face interaction with students during this trying time, there are several distinct benefits of digital marketing to be aware of.

Not only will you be able to harness various tools to determine which properties (from banner ads to search engines) generate the most leads, but you'll be able to track those leads to figure out which ones are worth your time, too. You can also get a large amount of information to students quickly and effectively.

DIRECT EMAIL AND TEXT MESSAGING

Targeted direct emails and text messaging are some of the best ways to reach prospective traditional students and their parents at this time. While direct email may be more effective at reaching parents who are already checking work emails several times a day, text messaging has always proven to be a more effective strategy with the digital generation of learners.

Customizing student-centered text messages and making sure students have the ability not just to text a generic helpline but an actual recruitment officer is essential. Now more than ever, students need to feel that personal connection.¹⁰



SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING

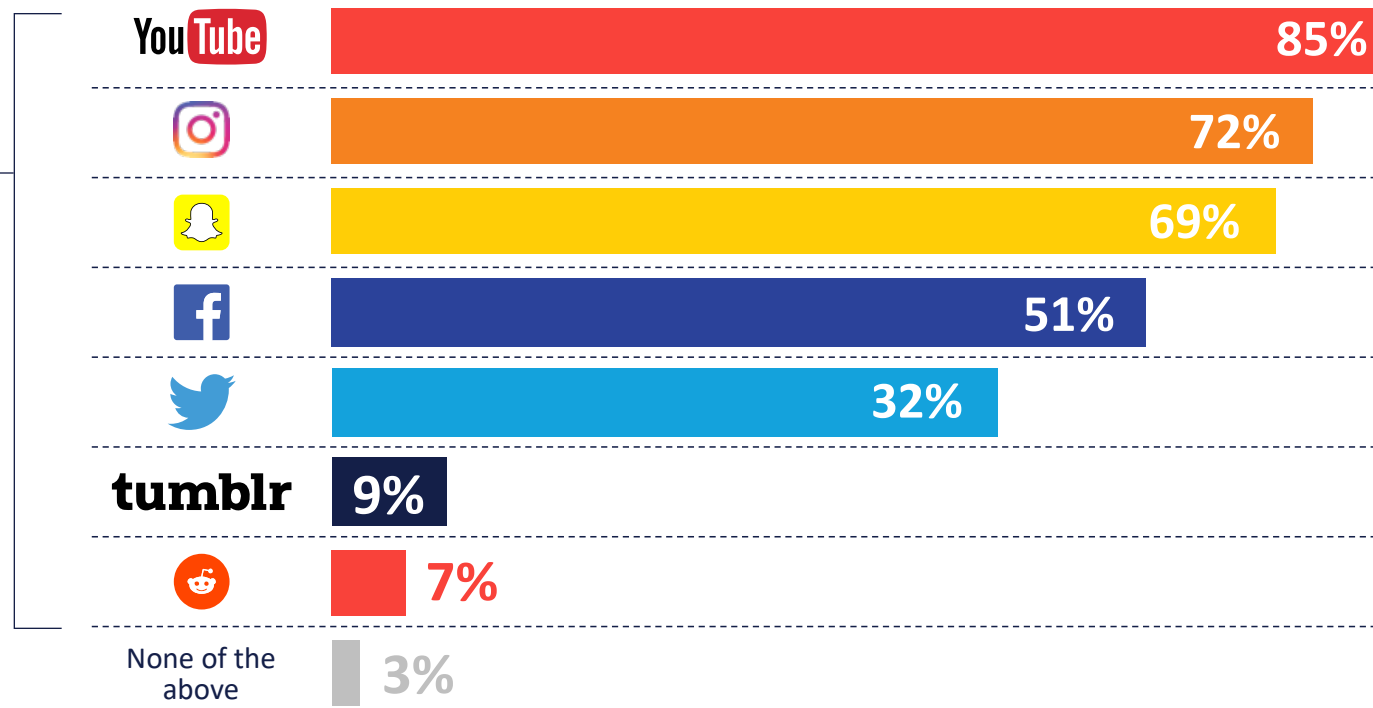
Social media marketing is another way to draw in prospective students. However, recruitment officers can't rely on a "spray and pray" approach but instead should use tailored techniques to convince students to apply and enroll.

Get organized and use market research for your university to find out which social media platforms your students tend to congregate to. LinkedIn and Pinterest are really a good choice for students at any stage of the college journey, but Instagram and Snapchat are increasingly popular options. If you're working to enroll traditional students, you're in the right demographic, too - these platforms dominate the attention of 16 to 20-year-olds.

Facebook is another social media outlet, but its use is decreasing among teenagers and young adults. It's more popular with adults, however, so may be more effective at reaching parents or nontraditional learners.³

Most popular Gen Z Social Channels

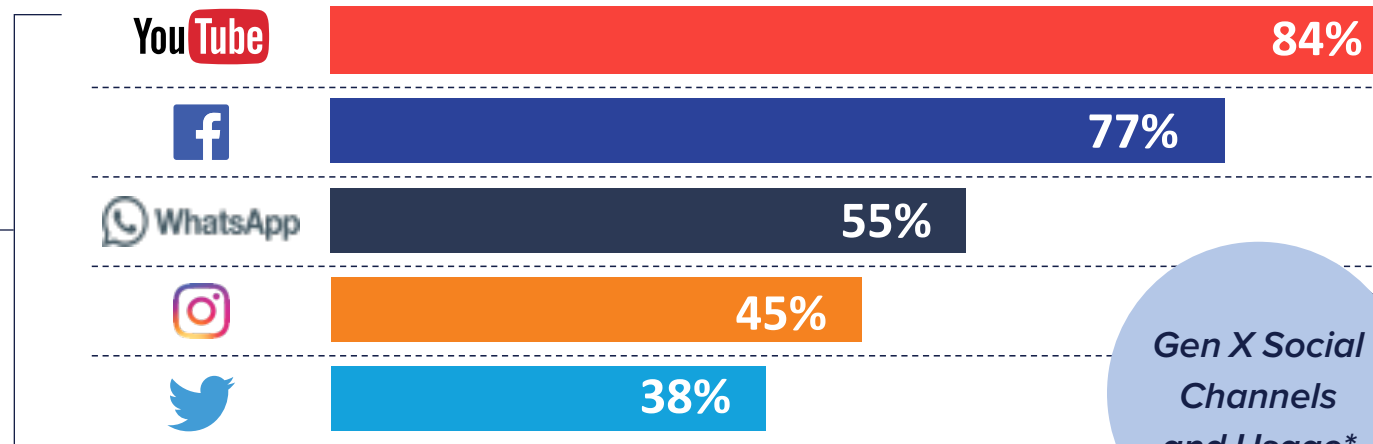
*"Fully 95% of teens have access to a smartphone, and 45% say they are online 'almost constantly'"**



*Teens, Social Media & Technology 2018, Pew Research Center Internet & Technology, <https://www.pewinternet.org/2018/05/31/teens-social-media-technology-2018/>

Gen Z's Parents – Channels of Influence

Gen Z Parents are mostly Gen X'ers (40-55 years old)



*Gen X Social Channels and Usage**

*Visualizing Social Media Usage by Generation, Visual Capitalist: <https://www.visualcapitalist.com/visualizing-social-media-use-by-generation/>

VIDEO TOURS AND WEBCASTS

Unfortunately, there is no way to duplicate the on-campus experience online - but it's a good place to start to build a brand.

Time is the biggest challenge for moving campus visits to online tours. After all, a typical visit to campus might last as little as an hour or as long as an entire day. These visits will not only feature pretty views of campus but also allow students to interact with current students, faculty, and staff.

To provide the same amount of information online would be impractical. Instead, recruitment officers should put short, ten-minute snippets online that showcase the very best features of the college.

Breaking up the videos into short segments will help grab the attention of prospective students and their parents who are engaging from afar. Plus, you can still include multiple videos to provide the same information (but in more digestible chunks). Schools can still involve their current students and staff in these events, too.

In designing the videos, consider providing the answers to simple questions in the clips. For example, the subject of one video

could be, "what clubs are on campus?" while another could be, "will I be assigned a roommate?" Videos should be separated out, with individual categories for parents and students along with joined segments for both, too.

Webcasts are another effective way of reaching students. These are particularly beneficial for hosting in-depth events about topics like housing, financial aid, and the application process.

These videos and webcasts shouldn't just be posted on the website. They should be sent out to students using all of the other digital marketing techniques above, including social media, direct email, and text messaging.⁵



ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT

Something that has always been a struggle for college recruitment officers - but is increasingly difficult in the current situation - is not necessarily reaching students, but encouraging them to reach back.

Colleges may want to harness the power of social media by sending out swag that would normally be provided at a campus visit - such as tee shirts, lanyards, and hats - and encouraging students to take a photo and upload it to social media. Applicable hashtags or captions can be added, too.

Incentivize the activity by tacking on some sort of prize or contest-type game, and engagement will go up even more. When a student feels connected to a brand, they are more likely to partake later on - in this case, to enroll.

MARKET RESEARCH

Now more than ever, college recruiters should be relying on solid market research to determine the best digital marketing strategy for their unique brand. No two colleges will market themselves in the same way. Colleges should partner with qualified outside organizations to make sure they are targeting their efforts in the right place.



Will Online Learning Experience a Surge?

Whether online learning increases in popularity over the next few months or stays more or less the same, only time will tell. However, one thing is for sure - now is a great time to be an online student, and colleges should take advantage of that in their recruitment.

While digital marketing to online students versus traditional learners will be more or less the same, there are a few key differences to keep in mind, too.

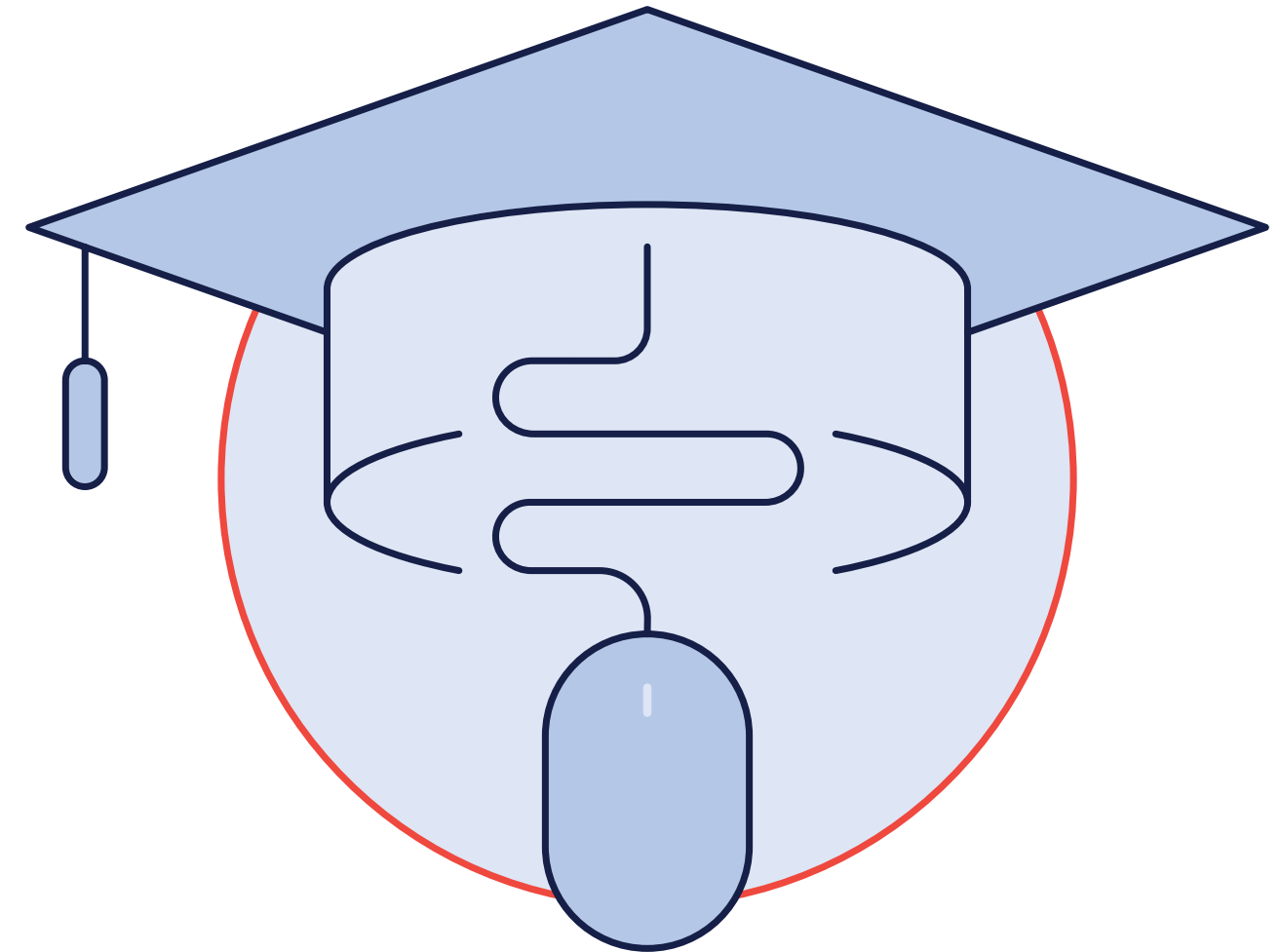
THE UNIQUE PSYCHOLOGY OF AN ONLINE STUDENT

As of 2017, roughly one in six students enrolled exclusively online.⁵ That's not even factoring in the number of students taking a few online courses here and there, either. There are several reasons for this surge. The first is a growing awareness and availability of online programs, with more students returning to school later in life to finish their degrees.

The stigma surrounding online learning has more or less disappeared, too. Employers are no longer disturbed by an online degree as long as the program is accredited. Instead,

it can showcase a feature of online learners that we've perhaps always known - they have excellent time management skills.

The beauty of online student recruitment during a time like this is that parents can work on their degrees from home, while homeschooling or babysitting children who are not currently in school. In addition, online programs can still be completed by international students who are not currently permitted to travel to the United States.



“ *There are several reasons for this surge. The first is a growing awareness and availability of online programs, with more students returning to school later in life to finish their degrees.”*

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ONLINE VS. TRADITIONAL STUDENT RECRUITMENT

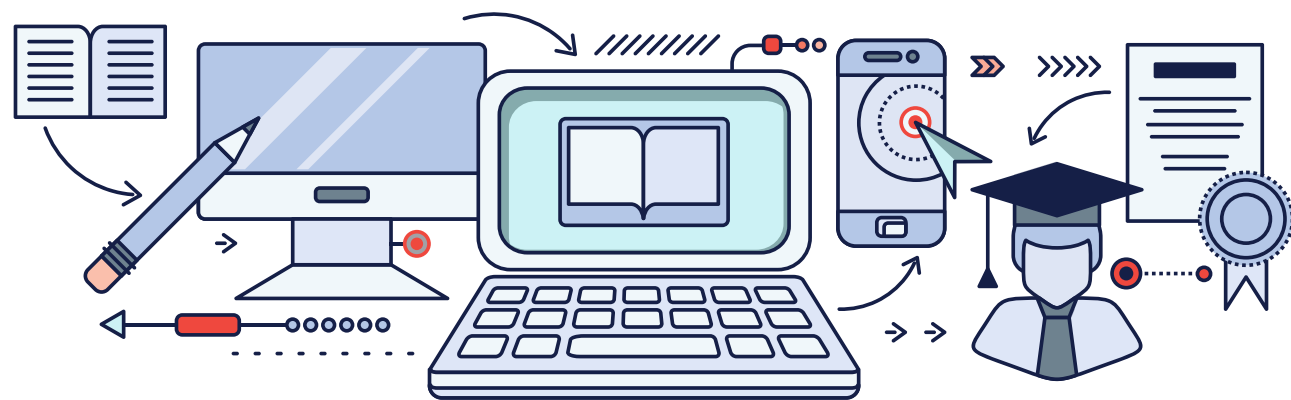
Online learners know what they're looking for, and they are less likely to apply to dozens of colleges than are traditional learners. Often, students seeking online programs are going about this for the second time around⁴, and they aren't going to fool around with multiple (expensive) college applications. If you can hook a student in during the application phase, you've likely got them for good.

A college's approach to online student recruitment needs to be a bit more targeted. Since online degrees are cheaper, you should be spending less money in your recruiting, too. The benefit of online marketing is that you can target students from all over the country. That said, 75% of all online

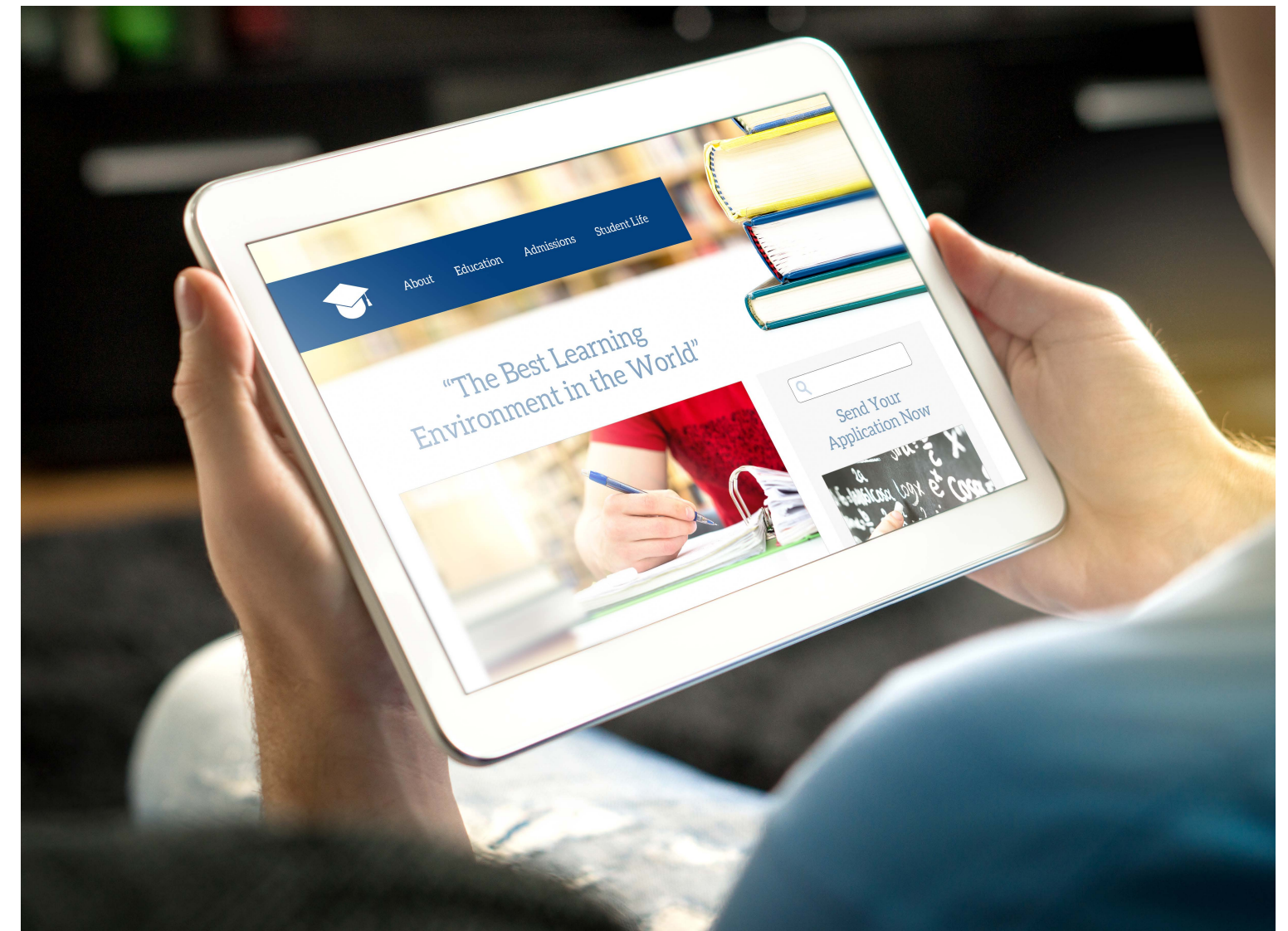
students enroll at school within 100 miles from home.

Engaging in a digital marketing campaign is essential for an online university. Utilize both paid campaigns and social media advertising. Be aware that students might be more skeptical when considering an online school - after all, the word of mouth referral piece is no longer there. Make sure your website is user-friendly and up to snuff - and ideally directs students to positive reviews.

The main difference in marketing to online students is that you need to make your brand stand apart from the thousands of others out there and you need to prove your school's credibility, too.



75%
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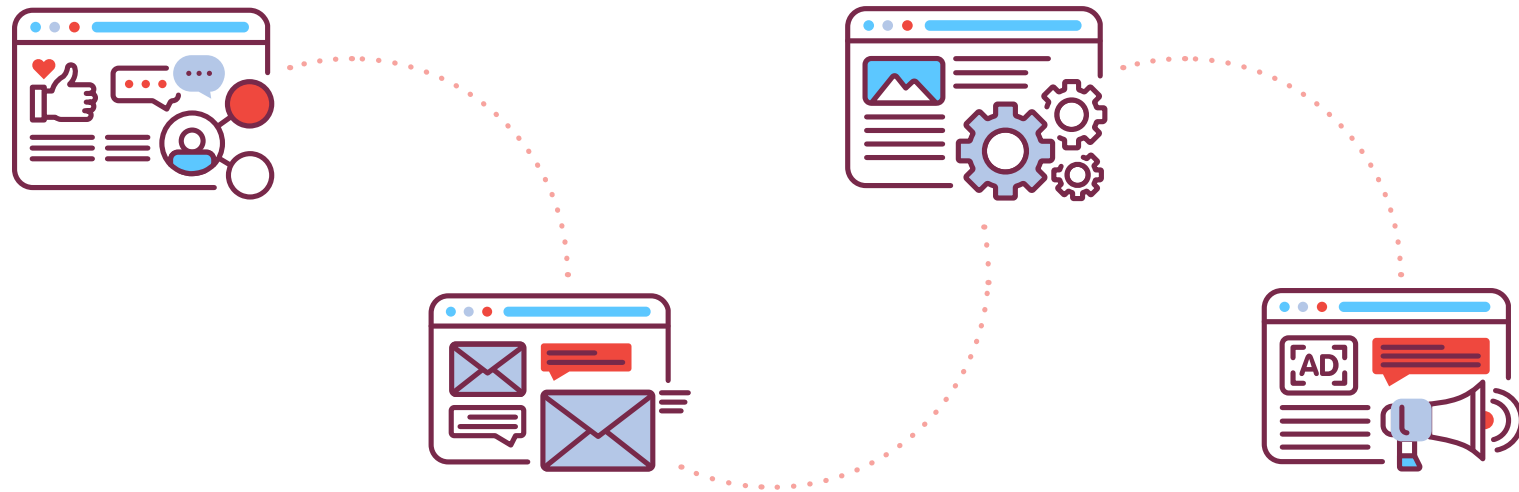
The Need For Consistent Branding in Digital Marketing

Whether you're attempting to target online or traditional students, consistent branding is important. Understanding what your college represents and offers as a brand is the best possible way to garner and convert leads.

If there is any good news to come out of the sudden and abrupt change in how college recruitment officers go about their digital marketing, it is that new and incredibly effective techniques may arise as a result.

Times are changing, and that's a fact that is recognized by everyone. Even NACAC, the body responsible for governing the legitimacy and fairness of college recruitment policies, has backed off on much of its policing.⁶

Nevertheless, college recruitment in this increasingly digital world does not need to become a time of stress or even a chaotic free-for-all. Instead, it should focus on smart recruitment strategies that recognize what students need and want right now - as well as how their behavior has always trended in the past.





We're Here to Help

AMG Higher Education Marketing works with schools across the Southeast region to drive student enrollment for online, traditional and graduate programs. Working with clients like University of Tennessee, Auburn, Shelton State, Faulkner University, Drake State, University of South Alabama, and many more, we have the expertise to create custom strategies designed to meet your enrollment marketing goals.

Take the next step and set up a free consultation with our marketing specialists today.

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