

HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE NEW DIGITAL

Website personalization for universities, to increase student enrollment

WHITE PAPER



INTRODUCTION

In the world of connected devices, consumers expect a tailored experience not just on the websites they shop, but across all their digital engagements. They want to engage with relevant, personalized content. Such expectations are now placed on all businesses, even colleges, and universities, which historically have not required advanced digital intervention. Various studies indicate a positive link between good student experience, enrollment, and retention. As a result, personalization is no longer a nice-to-have feature for websites of higher education institutions, but a necessary feature that prospective students seek as they evaluate which college is the best fit for them.

At TA Digital, our digital strategists believe universities can take advantage of personalization on their websites to improve the experience of each prospective student and augment conversions.

This whitepaper intends to provide necessary insights to digital marketers at higher education universities, on opportunities for personalization to increase student intake. It dwells on research data in the higher education industry and digital gaps, while attempting to provide a strategic approach and opportunities related to 'personalization' for augmenting student enrollment.

Some questions that are answered here, are:

- What are students looking for in their prospective college?
- How do you make the initial connect and then engage students deeper?
- How can you tap them via social places, platforms?
- What should you keep in mind to avoid noise and show information that matters?
- How can you influence the enrollment decisions and make the student take the final step?

Also, a quick end note has been included on the models followed at TA Digital, leveraging templates and processes specific to higher education digital marketing, that have evolved based on user (prospective student) research and our experience with universities and other education institutions.

This has been provided to support any queries for topics of digital marketing in higher education, that may not be covered in depth, in this whitepaper.

DIGITAL INITIATIVES IN HIGHER EDUCATION – UNDERSTANDING STUDENTS' ONLINE BEHAVIORS

Let's assess our audience profile – undergraduate students. We should typically consider them the Gen Z segment. It is common knowledge that Gen Z students have gotten accustomed to personalized online experiences. Some data points that support this insight are:

- **50% of Gen Z** would discontinue visiting a website if it does not predict what they liked or wanted.
- On the other hand, Gen Z is found to be pretty willing to share personal information to obtain a more predictive online experience; in fact, **25% more likely than other generations.**

Another behavior that is important to note is that there is still a sizable number of students who do not identify themselves while evaluating their enrollment into a university online.

From a recent survey, it has been found that **33% of prospective students fail to identify themselves** before applying.

- Clark University recently reported that 50% of their undergraduate applications were stealth.
- This is a valuable insight to understand sophomore transfers. Many schools have reported that more than **60% of transfer prospects are stealth**.

So, in continuing with understanding Gen Z, we also know that they are self-learners and depend on YouTube greatly for content. They are interested in niche courses and programs, mainly those oriented to social responsibilities, and not to mention - they have higher IQs.

With this view of the audience, which is - the prospective students' segment, let us now look at how universities and colleges can focus on personalization of their 'website', that essentially is the main center of the student enrollment journey.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR PERSONALIZATION – INTERESTING FEATURES TO CONSIDER

So, what specific goals and features can be considered for incorporating personalization into the college website. Below are listed some key features and approaches to personalize and engage the students better, thus leading to higher intake.

	01 Initiating engagement with the prospective students
	02 Deepening engagement by providing progressive information
	03 Reaching the right audience with relevant information
	04 Making interactions more meaningful – promoting webinars and events that matter
	05 Influencing their decision-making – answering key questions of the students
	06 Persuasion towards the last mile – alert them of what they may miss

1. Initiating engagement with the prospective students

When prospective students first land on the university website, one may not know much about them, but how they arrived at the site tells us a lot about them.

Did they come in through a particular Facebook ad for the graduate/undergraduate program?

Or

Did they click through on an email that was sent to students about the university's courses?

The moment potential students interact with the site, they may already be giving clues about what matters to them. In such a scenario, a static website can leave the prospect to navigate on their own and result in poor engagement.

However, personalization can deliver relevant messaging that will help them find what they're looking for.



For instance, if a visitor came in through a Facebook ad for your law courses, you could display a hero image with the ranking of your law school and its performance and provide a CTA for the visitor to explore the law school area of your site.



2. Deepening engagement by providing progressive information

It's unusual for a prospective student to land on a site and fill an application form right away. There is a long research and discovery process that all prospects undergo to understand if the college and the course are the right fit for them.

Using personalization, the user experience can navigate the site visitors through the process and guide them to the next stage.



For example, first-time visitors could be shown a CTA aimed towards driving them to useful resources, like the 'Program Details' page or 'Student Life on Campus' page. After the prospective students have visited these pages, or if they have interacted with the website multiple times without scheduling a campus tour or requesting additional information, personalization will prescribe CTAs that are displayed suggesting or persuading them to take these next steps.



3. Reaching the right audience with relevant information

For undergraduate students, researching potential majors is a vital part of the discovery process. Prospective undergraduate students fall anywhere between being totally sure about their specific major to being completely undecided.

Thus, researching potential majors constitutes a critical part of the discovery process for a student. What a specific student is looking for on the college's website depends heavily on what subjects they are interested in and how strongly they feel about their choice.

By incorporating personalization, we can understand which courses and subjects are most important to a prospective student based on how he/she engages with the content on the site. Accordingly, the website must personalize content to reflect his/her favorites program thereby guiding prospective students to relevant areas of the website and helping them in the decision-making process.

4. Making interactions more meaningful – promoting webinars and events that matter

Regional events and webinars offer valuable opportunities for colleges and universities to engage prospective students. As these regional events may not be relevant to every visitor so the site shouldn't recommend them to all or make each site visitor filter events in their area.

Personalization will allow you to identify the visitor's location and promote the relevant events and webinars. With such relevant and bespoke messaging on the site, you can ensure that the best possible experience is provided to the prospects, which will aid in increasing your event registrations and improve your chances of interacting with the prospective students in person.

5. Influencing their decision-making – answering key questions of the students

Often there are additional factors that prospective students have to consider in their decision-making processes like financial aid and credit transfers. It's imperative that the centers of higher education understand these needs to create and deliver content that highlights how the institution fulfills these requirements.

For example, if there is data that a visitor has spent time engaging with pages about financial aid and scholarships on your site, this is an insight to incorporate relevant content on the homepage just for that individual or recommend an FAQ on that topic.

6. Persuasion towards the last mile – alert them of what they may miss

Colleges can create an urgency to drive interested students to submit applications by reminding them of the critical deadlines.

For example, you could target site visitors who have viewed the Application page but haven't yet completed or submitted their application with mails to remind them of the days left for the submission deadline.

AN END NOTE

To conclude, we can say that there are two key elements that universities must incorporate in the digital experiences on their websites, to effectively engage prospective students.

- First, their website must meet the best digital standards that site visitors have now gotten used to.
- Secondly, their website must answer the key questions that arise in prospective students' minds in the decision-making stage.

Personalization can help higher education institutions create relevant and intuitive experiences that cater to each prospective student's needs and expectations.

STRATEGIC APPROACH TO PERSONALIZATION – THE TA DIGITAL MODEL

At TA Digital, our core team of digital strategists start with understanding the audience for personalization and the models that need to be built for them.

This is backed with the functional understanding of the Higher education domain that has come from our experience in partnering with universities and other academia coupled with our technology solution capabilities panning the spectrum of digital – CMS, ecommerce, experience and UI technologies, marketing automation, analytics and personalization powered by AI / ML.

This integrated approach combining domain, customer, and technology focus has helped us evolve high maturity processes and templates in assessments and implementation of personalization solutions.

Be it leveraging our partnerships with Adobe for implementing Target, Campaign, or Marketo solutions along with Adobe Analytics, or implementing other platforms like Teamsite, Sitecore or Drupal, the technology and business experts at TA Digital can guide clients from concept to capability.

This involves the approach that connects multi-business needs with multi-solution design requirements.

Here's a peek into a structured approach for gap analysis of digital marketing needs – tailored for Higher Education clients, that is followed at TA Digital towards understanding and guiding them in their digital marketing strategies.



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University Higher Ed Digital Marketing needs - Gap Analysis		Weightage		
Digital Marketing area	Description	Value	Cost	Client Score Net Score
Innovative PPC Strategies	Highly effective in generating high-quality leads while broadcasting brand to qualified individuals, ultimately turning clicks into prospective students. In Search, PPC is a hotbed for student acquisition, with degree-seekers constantly turning to Google and Bing to help them decide their career/academic path. When it comes to paid advertising on social platforms, it is important to stand out with the university's missions, ideals, and unique value propositions for international students outside of online, flexible, innovative curriculum to begin conveying the information that matters to a student's personal journey.			
Mobile Optimized Search Ads	By bidding higher for mobile devices in Google Adwords and Bing ads while utilizing mobile optimized ad extensions we can increase the CTR significantly.			
Managed Placements And Interests	Managed placements is a good strategy as international students visit specific websites related to specific program or university. (For example TopUniversities.com) Say, for an University's management program, display ads can be placed on education related websites and focus on pages relevant to higher education and career advancement. This will help us to make sure the ads are shown to those more likely to click on the ad to learn more. This is slow but steady and cost effective - retargeting allows you to reach out to users who have already showed interest to brand or program and to get them to re-engage with brand. it helps convert more students compared to traditional targeting, since users are more likely to engage with ads from brands that they know.			
Facebook Retargeting Campaigns	Higher education is a competitive landscape. Leveraging link building strategies can help the University's website with a steady stream of high-quality and relevant backlinks. Eg. the content will need to be evergreen with Infographic Visuals, Industry Expert Roundups Informative and High Utility Content			
Link building	This includes keyword rich title tags, relevant meta descriptions, keyword density, optimized header tags, internal linking, and much more.			
On-Page SEO	Is the site technically sound so that it can be properly crawled by Google. Some things to look for when performing a technical SEO audit are: 404 errors, missing/broken XML sitemaps, slow page load times, duplicate content, irrelevant/thin content, and more!			
Technical SEO	Keyword research with an emphasis on target long-tail variations of core keywords, using keyword pods/clusters content can be created with the best opportunity to rank in the search results. Once this is completed and upon distribution, the content may rank for			
Website Content Strategies				

For a better understanding of the digital solutions capabilities at TA Digital, and to know more about this topic, please contact:

ali.alkafaji@tadigital.com | radhika.i@tadigital.com

TA Digital is the only global boutique agency that delivers the “best of both worlds” to clients seeking to achieve organizational success through digital transformation. Unlike smaller, regional agencies that lack the ability to scale or large organizations that succumb to a quantity-over-quality approach, we offer resource diversity while also providing meticulous attention to the details that enable strategic success.

Over the past 20 years, TA Digital has positioned clients to achieve digital maturity by focusing on data, customer-centricity and exponential return on investment; by melding exceptional user experience and data-driven methodologies with artificial intelligence and machine learning, we enable digital transformations that intelligently build upon the strategies we set into motion. We are known as a global leader that assists marketing and technology executives in understanding the digital ecosystem while identifying cultural and operational gaps within their business-ultimately ushering organizations toward a more mature model and profitable digital landscape.

Recognized in 2013, 2014, 2015, and 2019 Inc. 5000 list as one of the most successful technology companies in the United States, TA Digital is pleased also to share high-level strategic partnerships with world class digital experience platform companies like Adobe, SAP and Salesforce and possess global partnerships with industry leaders such as Sitecore, Episerver, Elastic Path, BigCommerce, AWS, Azure and Coveo.

