Winning One Program at a Time: A Systemic Approach

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Abstract

Many Universities are missing an opportunity to focus student recruitment marketing efforts and budget at the program level, which can offer lower priced advertising opportunities with higher conversion rates than traditional University level marketing initiatives.

At NC State University, we have begun to deploy a scalable, low-cost, program level marketing system across 18 online and distance education programs. Programs that have deployed this system for two years or more have achieved 95-125% enrollment by the end of their second year in the program.

The Status Quo: University Level Marketing

Today's college applicants are heavily influenced by their online experience. Subramaniam, Wan Yusoff and Othman (2014, p. 94) found that the University's website had the greatest reach and influence on students' decision to choose that particular institution. In fact, a significant portion of prospective applicants (25%) will never look to sources outside of the web when shopping for education (EAB COE Forum, 2015, p. 27).

While many universities recognize this and expend considerable resources on their web experience, it is often done by promoting the university as a whole, rather than specific programs. This approach can be inefficient:

Search Term Inefficiency
When buying a search engine term using pay-per-click, or attempting to optimize a website for a search term online, broad search terms are generally more competitive, and thus more expensive, than narrow search terms. Broad terms can also lead to low conversion rates because people using them have not yet decided what they want. For example, on February 27th, 2016, Google AdWords suggested a cost per click bid price of $42.67 for the keyword "nc online degrees." At the same time, the keyword "online master of statistics" suggested bid price was only $4.94.

Landing Page Inefficiency
When marketing at the University level, prospective applicants have to navigate a web of likely inefficient search utilities or browse through department level sites to find the programs they are interested in. Even if the institution has a decent search interface, online and adult focused programs are likely to exist in a distance or adult learners section of the site.

Analytics Inefficiency
Traffic directed to University websites will often leave to go to a department website or course directory. Because most universities don't have one unified analytics system, it then becomes difficult to know where users are coming and going. This then makes it impossible to measure the Return On Investment for marketing expenditures.

The Alternative: Program Level Marketing

Lowry and Owens (2001) suggest that today's prospective students are career-oriented and focus on specific academic programs during their search, rather than the total offerings of the institution. Our experience has proved this out, and thus our hypothesis is that Universities can win the recruitment race by focusing marketing efforts at the program level.

This starts with driving prospective students who know what they want to highly targeted websites that deliver a personally relevant experience. This leads to a lower cost per prospect, higher engagement, higher application rates and a high return on investment.

While the program level is the optimal place to focus marketing attention, program coordinators are often responsible for recruiting with limited access to technical and marketing resources. Thus, to achieve our goals, we have deployed a low cost combination of web technology, marketing services and online community management best practices.

The first component is a solid program level website that is focused on just one academic program or subject area, even if multiple related degrees are available.

Content on the site should be constantly revised to account for new information, and should anticipate prospective students' needs. In a survey of college bound students, 88% of respondents indicated they would stop researching a school or be disappointed with the school if its website didn't provide the content they needed, and 80% said content was more important than design. In fact, more than half (57%) of respondents indicated they would remove a school from their list if the content on their website seemed dated, incorrect, or unhelpful (Noel-Levitz, 2009, p. 2). As such, the content on a program site should help prospective students see how these degrees can help them along their career path, answer key questions they have, and drive them to very specific points of engagement (such as contacting an advisor, requesting additional information, or applying to the program).

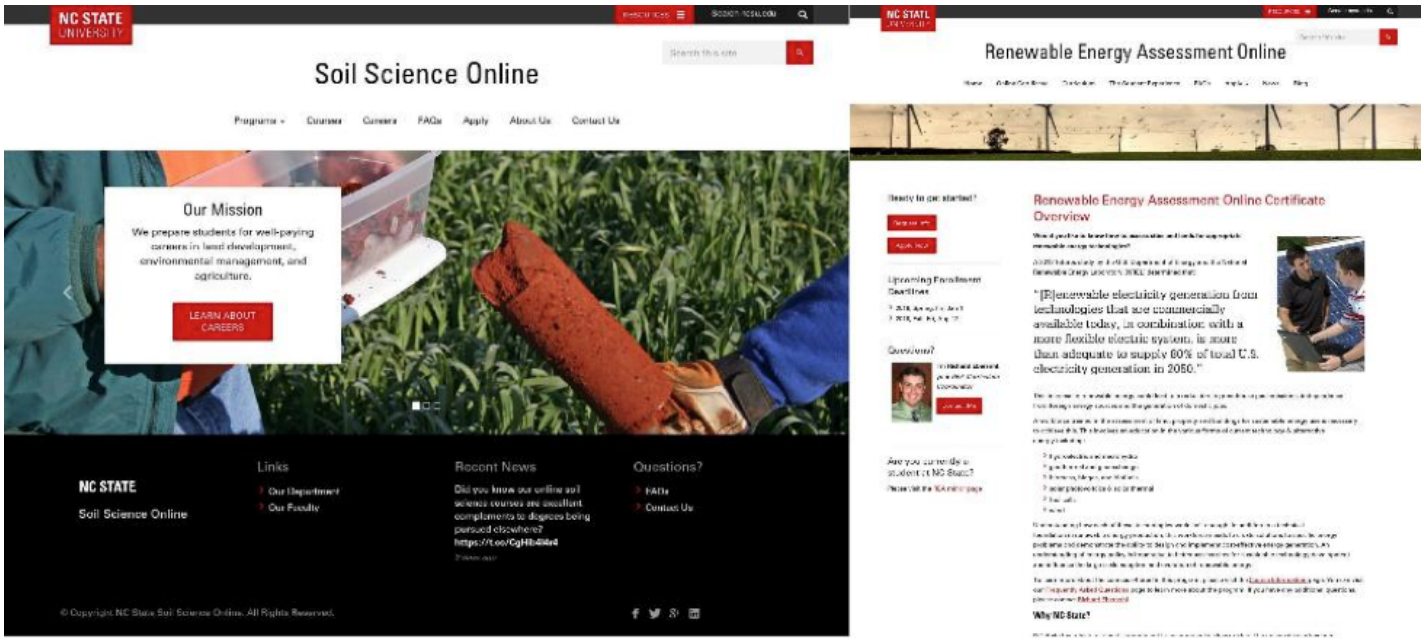

Figure 1. A simple, program level homepage that directs users to the content they are most interested and a specific degree landing page with clear calls to action, promotion of the program advisor and good SEO content.

Impeccable content, however, may not be sufficient to provide a positive website experience for a prospective student. We now live in a multi-screen world; 65% of online searches begin on a smartphone before transitioning to a different device, and 90% of adults use multiple screens sequentially to accomplish a task (EAB COE Forum, 2014, p. 11). Thus, the program site should be mobile and tablet optimized, with clear calls to action above the fold on every page. Pages should promote the contact information for advisors within that program to begin to build a human connection with the prospect.

Next, you will need to deploy some basic Online Marketing. Campaigns should initially target audiences who have already shown an interest in the subject matter. While traditional University based advertising sends a broad message to a broad range of people, our marketing methodology aims to saturate the online experience of only the best prospective applicants. This begins with tie-ins from main university pages and continues with advertising in and optimization for Search Engines. This is a critical part of the system because "online marketing provides the best return on investment for enrollment; Google AdWords and SEO offer the two highest returns on investment within this sector" (EAB AA Forum, 2014, p. 10). We then reinforce targeted messaging with remarketing ads, contextual banner ads, career-targeted LinkedIn ads and interest-based Facebook ads.

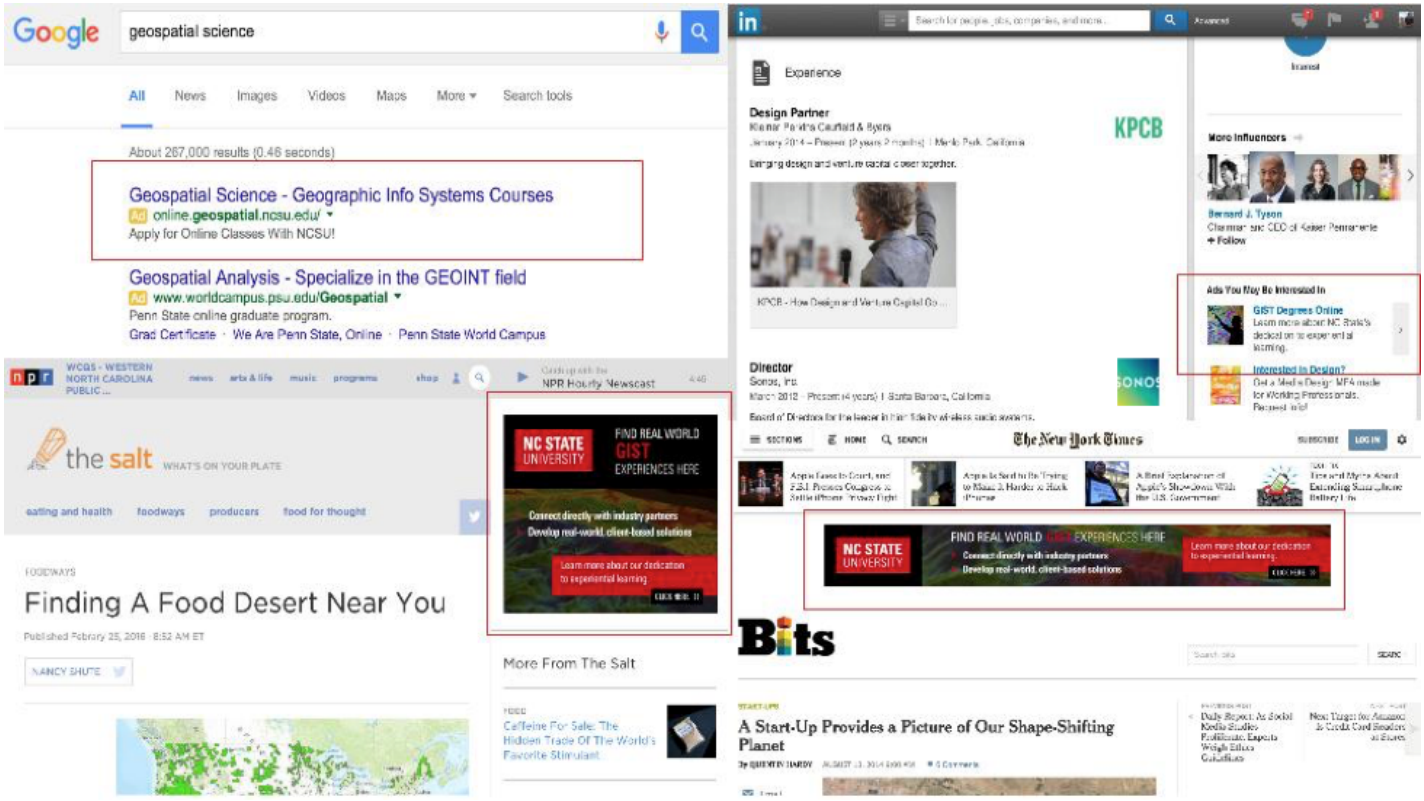

Figure 2. Some real life examples of contextually targeted, pay per click ads served from Google AdWords, LinkedIn, Google Banner Ads, and

Google Remarketing. The same basic ad templates were used for all programs.

The third component is a focus on relationship building that seeks to quickly connect a prospect with their personal advisor via email responses, web conferences and phone calls. This relationship is then supported by monthly email marketing and regular personal outreach from their advisor. To compete within an ever-growing marketplace, a positive customer experience driven by personalized communication, especially during the recruiting process, is not just important - it is increasingly a necessity (Wood, 2015).

Another key relationship program coordinators should develop is with industry partners. This outreach can help establish key content partnerships, referral partnerships and deep links to the program website.

Once the key marketing activities are in place, performance reporting is critical. Web analytics should be used to track each marketing activity, how it brings users to the site, what those users do on the site, and how they find and engage with the key calls to action (such as contacting an advisor, requesting information or beginning the application process).

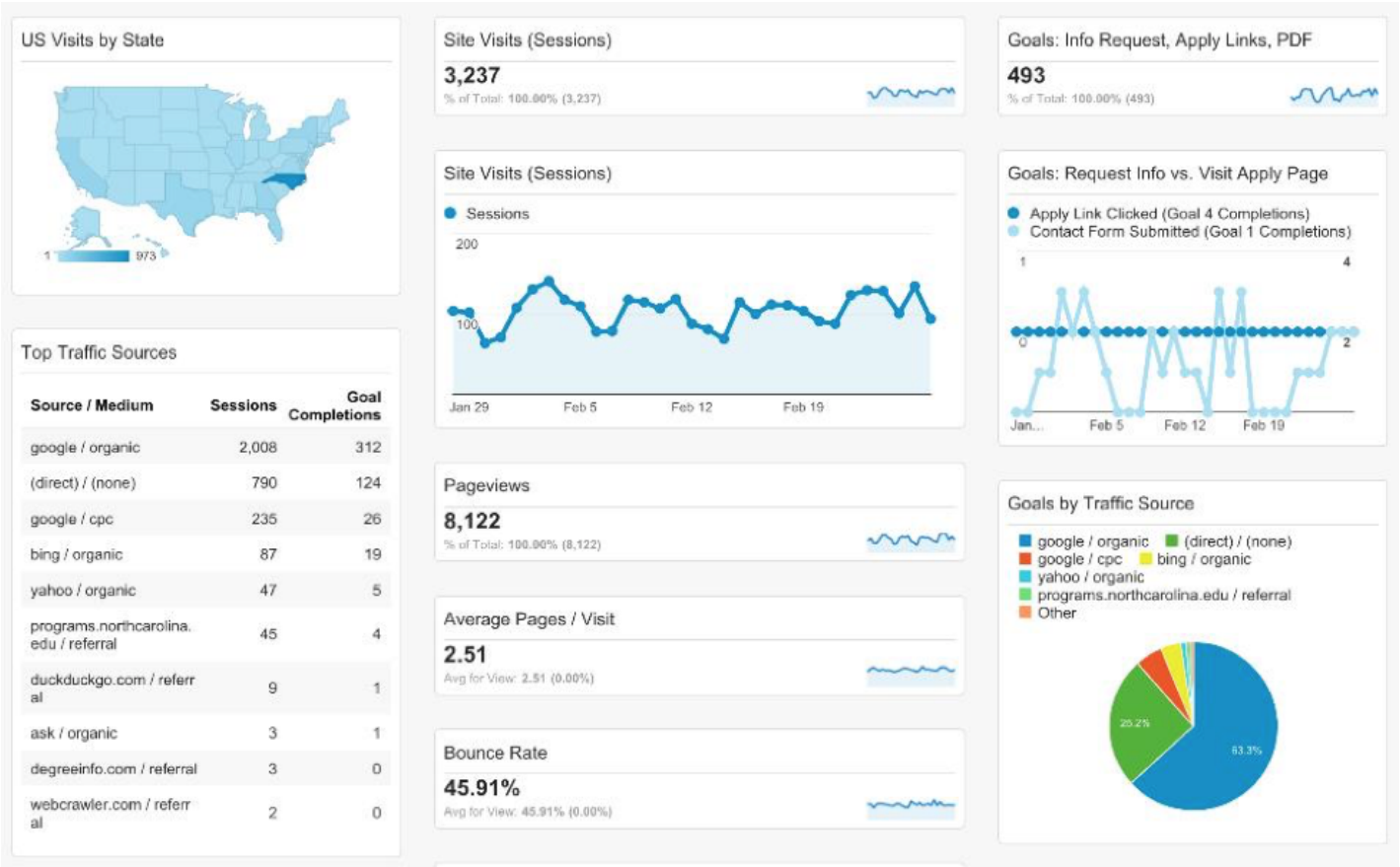

Figure 3. Clear and actionable analytics clearly articulate where prospects are coming from, what they are doing on the site and which engagement paths they are on.

Finally, we suggest deploying professional marketing coaches that help put these systems in place, guide the program coordinator along the way, reviews the analytics to see what's working, and tweak the program to move closer to what works best and away from what doesn't.

Following these best practices, we deployed online experiences for online and blended programs at NC State University over the past three years to great effect.

Of the 3 Programs that have deployed this approach for over two years, all of them exceeded 95% of their target enrollment before the end of the second year. After participating in this approach for two years, one program declined to continue with the approach, only to see their enrollment drop 65% the following year.

Of the 12 Programs have deployed this approach for more than one year, 50% of them have already met or exceeded their enrollment objectives. The average return on investment across these programs is 1340%.

In conclusion, Universities who generally focus on university-wide and "brand" marketing should consider broadening tactics to include more individual online and distance education program-level budgeting and marketing. Following these best practices at the program level drastically improves a program's likelihood of student recruitment success and self-sustainability.

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