Measuring Results in an Ever-Changing Digital Landscape

by Anthony D. Paul

idfive

Marcom for Higher Education + Non-Profit + Brands on a Mission

A marketing strategy for a college or university is riddled with more unknowns than you can imagine: shifting market forces, evolving audience sentiment, the rise and fall of popular media channels, and Google's all-powerful chameleon of a ranking algorithm. To keep pace and to make sure our marketing dollars and efforts are not raining on an empty dance floor, we set goals and, at some point in the future, someone lets us know if we passed or failed—if we did our job and "arrived" at our grand target.

Up-front, we set those lofty but attainable goals as a group. Attracting visitors, building brand-audience relationships, and fulfilling user needs are all examples of noble goals for your digital properties and campaigns. Each can be held as a visage on the horizon, to be walked toward as a definition of success. But how will you know:

- When you're walking in the wrong direction, and when to course-correct as soon as possible?
- Which of multiple paths is the better?
- When you've arrived—or gotten to an important mile-marker, collected the reward, but at that point continuing to walk has diminished benefit?

If we aren't defining success in measureable terms and taking incremental measurements, our budgets, resources, and digital efforts risk being underutilized at best—blindly wrong at worst.

ROI is Not a
Four Letter Word.

In business school, you learn the formula for calculating return on investment (ROI) is relatively simple:

100 * ((Total Revenue - Total Cost) / Total Cost) = Your % of Return

The difficulty is not in the algorithm, but in deciding which numbers to plug into the variables. Total revenue and total cost are often unknown or imprecise, and when they do exist, whomever has that information tends to safeguard it with their life—recognizing measurement and reporting has powerful implications. For example, the person who knows what percentage of tuition goes toward the marketing budget may be sensitive to students learning that number.

If you'd like to try calculating the numbers, start by asking, "What's the total revenue a new student generates for the school?" However, be warned this question immediately becomes hairy:

- What constitutes "new student"? Are we tracking the number of new students by semester or incoming class?

- How is a new student's anticipated value calculated? By average number of semesters per student? How is that figure affected by in-state versus out-of-state, or by transfers?

- Is value calculated in the near-term or are we trying to figure out life-long value through average alumni contribution?

- How do grants, scholarships, and loans affect our revenue calculations?

- How is our total cost calculated? Are we only considering recruitment and marketing, or also retention through education and graduation?

The easiest way to answer these questions is by not answering them at all and to instead ask, "What was the investment we made for X push, and how many enrollments did it generate?" The numbers in this instance can still be tricky to isolate if there are other cost-per-acquisition influencers—like more than one campaign, regional economics impacting enrollments, or the cost of any effort changing; but taking incremental measurements should still reveal any uptick or downtick sandwiching a new marketing effort. And then of course, ascertaining the quality of those leads.

Developing Metrics That Matter.

Choosing when and where to measure is just as important as what to measure. Lumping an entire year's performance into one large average can tell you year-over-year how you're doing, but won't reveal what you're doing right or wrong. Mapping specific tracking codes, URLs, or call numbers to each channel can bring clarity to which button was clicked, but doesn't give credit to the larger campaign leading up to the conversion. Drop that beautiful button into a desert and it won't be compelling on its own.

Even the household name “Google Analytics” is a shotgun of uselessness on its own. Is a longer “time on site” a positive because audiences are more engaged, or a negative because they’re not finding what they’re looking for? Is a high bounce rate a weakness because we’d like visitors to look at more pages, or a strength because they’re finding exactly what they need on one? To provide that qualitative context, multiple types of measurements need to be taken in concert.

Step back and outline a research process. Identify your performance goals and translate those into research objectives. For example:

Goal: Increase the number of requests for program information.

Research Questions:

- What is the current volume of requests?
- Who is requesting and where are they coming from?
- What is the quality of requests (signal to noise)?

Next, take those research questions and determine what combination of measurements will answer each of them in a volumetric and contextual way. Google Analytics? Browser cookies? Surveys? Usability tests, focus groups, or interviews? After you’ve assembled a list of methods to answer your research questions, you’ll need to track change over time:

1. Evaluate today’s digital properties and marketing efforts to determine a benchmark to compare against.

2. Evaluate important design deliverables like prototypes or concepts, to validate any decisions before they’re rolled out.

3. Incrementally evaluate after launch, building continuous improvement into your process. Run A/B tests and adjust tactics accordingly.

In the end, every brand and audience is different. Your goals will be unique and the types of measurements needed to litmus your performance metrics and audience sentiment will be unique. Defining the “just right” analysis recipe for you and yours will be the challenge, and it isn’t always in alignment with what’s best for the industry or another brand. If your research questions are being answered in a useful way, your recipe is doing its job.

Abandon
"Set it and Forget it"

Having a mature strategy for measurement in place is the first step in sharpening your digital campaigns and properties. Second is recognizing change is inevitable. More than likely, you're in this process of evaluation because what you have today (or what you had yesterday) isn't performing well enough. Throwing a new site or campaign over the fence and letting it ride won't compete in today's media world, where everything published immediately begins its half-life deterioration.

What's right today, isn't necessarily right for tomorrow. Brands are ever-evolving, with new qualities, new value statements, and changing growth needs. Your audience also shifts in needs and sentiment, as evidenced by all of the changes in perception of higher education. The climate you compete within changes, with audience consumption patterns driving new types of institutions. Higher education need only look toward AOL, Blockbuster, or Airwalk Shoes to see dozens of examples of the "unsinkable" businesses drifting out to sea. "Good enough" is a fast track toward expiration.

A brand is a living and breathing thing to nurture. We encourage it to grow, to build lasting relationships, and to mature. As it grows, it makes new friends, has new needs, and explores. It's accepting of change. And just as any living thing, to remain healthy it needs maintenance. Every medical nip and tuck is an improvement on the new organism, but we know we'll need more improvements in the future. Embrace measurement as a means of giving direction to your future marketing efforts and brand. Identify measurable goals, determine the research questions to ask, evaluate progress, and change direction as needed. Welcome change to your organizational goals, audience needs, digital touchpoints, and campaign messaging. Thrive.