

Forget the Funnel

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For marketers in higher education, recruitment season is an elaborate game of channels and funnels: Lock down your creative. Build out your landing pages. Tweak your forms. Buy your lists and ads. Send out mailings and emails. Then sit back and wait.

Not all of your targets will click an ad or submit a precious RFI, but for the ones that do: BAM! They're in the funnel. Then it's time to work that flow with some sweet, sweet nurture, and they're as good as yours!

So if it's that easy, why are so many schools hurting for enrollment?

OK, we get it: demographics, economics, student loan fatigue, and so on. There just aren't enough prospects to go around, right? If there were, they'd be knocking down your door.

But that doesn't explain why you might have a hard time filling those graduate program seats. After all, now that Millennials have graduated and entered the workforce, shouldn't the largest generation since the Baby Boomers be teed up and ready to enroll in professional graduate programs?

The short answer is no. And there may be myriad reasons for the lack of interest. Maybe they're not ready. Maybe your programs just don't appeal to them. Maybe the demographics in your region have changed. Maybe your ranking isn't where you want it to be. Maybe your agency's work sucks. Maybe you're working the funnel wrong.

Or, maybe, what if there isn't a "funnel" anymore?

Marketers traditionally think in terms of the "sales funnel" when it comes to purchasing decisions. The prospect moves from interest to purchase, following a series of discrete steps along the way.

Traditionally advertisers have concentrated on the "top" of the funnel, the "widest" part with the most prospects. Conventional marketing wisdom is a numbers game: Get in front of people to push a sufficient number of them into the funnel, stay in touch with them until they buy, and eventually—even though the initial herd may be thin during the transition from intention to action—you'll have your customers.

But is that how *you* buy things?

Sure, the attention-interest-action model may apply when you buy something that you don't need to think about too much. That's why grocery stores put those tasty, irresistible treats on the endcaps near the checkout counter. They're not counting on you doing research or gathering opinions from your friends on social media before you toss those ChocoMarshy SaltySnax in your cart. But the sales funnel is a lot more complicated in the Digital Age.

Information drives purchase decisions and we're all exposed to way more media (and, therefore, information) than ever before. And that complicates things. A lot.

The sales funnel isn't a funnel anymore. It's a circle. And you should get used to spreading your marketing efforts along the entire student lifecycle.

Marketing in the Analog Age

During the less enlightened Analog Age marketers took great pains to time their messages to you, based on when you might be likely to buy. It could be the season—summertime is always good for cars, kids think about college in the fall, etc.—or it could be a life change like buying a house or having a baby.

Marketers knew these kinds of triggers got you thinking about a new set of wheels, the College of Your Dreams, a new living room suite, or maybe even life insurance. They carefully cultivated their lists or timed their ads (print, radio, billboards and primetime TV) and hoped that you'd take the bait and fall into the funnel. Once you were there, they knew that they controlled the conversation (more or less). Regardless of the individual outcome, you were only fooling yourself if you thought you were in control of the experience.

The Digital Age Difference

Many of the analog channels still exist in one form or another. But today's consumers are bombarded with information from the minute they wake up and check their calendars on their phones until the moment they fall asleep while streaming a show on their tablets. In between, they're tethered to their phones and computer screens. Who's in control? It's hard to say. But it's not a limited number of commercial interests who can afford to buy broadcast media.

Consumers' digital journeys are now a garden of forking paths: new branches in the decision tree split off in near-infinite options. There may still be a linear, attention-interest-action progression, but influencing the course of that progression now requires understanding a few important new facts:

1. **Timing promotions has limited value.** Yes, time of year and life events matter increasingly less. This is especially true in higher ed as the population of prospects moves further away from the traditional high school teenager with a singular focus on college to a more complex population of teens and adults at various stages of their life experience.
2. **Media matters.** People use different media for different reasons. Mobile isn't the same as desktop because people looking up information on a phone often aren't in the same stationary situations as their desktop counterparts. Ads on social media don't work like ads in publications because people use social media for different reasons and in different ways than browsing the web for news, product information, or entertainment. An ad forwarded by (or endorsed by) a friend has a different impact on a consumer than an ad that pops up unbidden online. A text message is more personal than a banner. You get the idea.
3. **Customers can be powerful advocates.** Before the Digital Age, we didn't have that much potential individual influence. If we regretted a purchase, there were a limited number of people who could hear about it. Today, one post to our timelines or one tweet can potentially voice our displeasure to hundreds (or a lot more). Thinking that the sales funnel ends after a purchase is nuts. In many ways, it's just beginning.
4. **Attention ain't what it used to be.** This one's a no-brainer and it's a well-known source of frustration to all marketers. But we can't forget it: Attention is a scarce commodity. If people didn't care much about your messages in the Analog Age, they care infinitely less today.

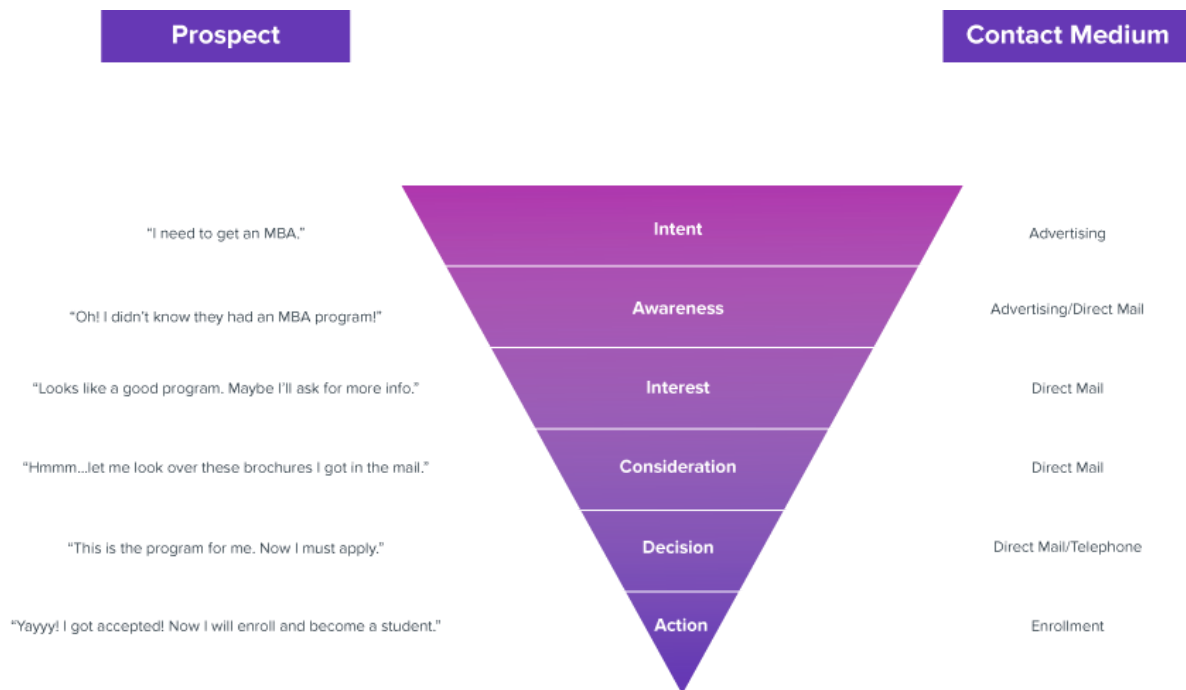
5. **The consumer is now in control.** The digital age shifted power from producer to consumer and from hierarchies to networks. Power is very much about control of information, and today, it's impossible to believe that any marketer can be fully in control of the information about their products and services. Therefore, the sales process is much less about guiding consumers to a purchase decision and a lot more about giving them the information and tools they need to move *themselves* to a purchase decision. This is a critical distinction. *Marketers:* Give it up. You're no longer in control.

So how do these new realities impact the sales funnel in real life? For higher-ed marketers, it's perhaps most instructive to look at how the new realities impact marketing to someone who:

- decides to enroll in a professional graduate program;
- completes the program; and
- has the potential to become a life-long advocate or brand ambassador for the school.

Beyond “The Funnel”

Let's look at a traditional recruitment sales funnel.



Looks pretty familiar, huh? From intent (“I need to get an MBA”) to the final action in the funnel (“I’m going to enroll!”), the traditional funnel operates on a few assumptions:

1. The prospect has the intent to enroll in the first place.
2. There’s a smooth progression from one stage to another in the decision-making process.
3. Repeated contact will move the decision along to the next stage.
4. The “sale” ends with enrollment.

Of course, as we’ve discussed, most of these assumptions are wrong. How do we know someone understands they want an MBA? Maybe they aren’t even sold on grad school in the first place? Are the contacts they receive from us the only information they’re going to use to make their decision?

No, of course not: They’re going to do some intensive online research, look at school websites, reach out to their social networks, and maybe even ask questions on some forums. Are they going to read each thing we send them through the mail? Are you kidding? And what happens after they enroll? Are they going to stay?

Are they going to tell others about their experience? They may go somewhere else—after all, there’s practically an infinite range of choices—and you can bet they’re going to tell others about their experience.

Now let's look at a better way of thinking about the process:



This process operates on an entirely new set of principles:

1. You can't predict when someone's going to want to pursue a professional graduate education.
2. People have questions that arise at each stage that need to be answered.
3. To answer their questions, people turn to different forms of media—and you have to be there. *It's not about controlling the conversation.*
4. Understand your prospects and be nimble and responsive enough to meet their needs.

5. Making a decision doesn't happen in a vacuum.
6. Decisions are made with verbs, not nouns. It's an active process, not a series of neat, discrete stages.
7. Once the "decision" has been made, customers can become advocates...or ex-customers.
8. The "sales" process never ends...and if it does, it means that you're doing something wrong.

Forget the funnel! Think about your prospects as participants, not passive recipients of your messages and recognize that no "sale" is final: you're looking to develop lifelong customers and advocates.

Work The Loop!

Applying these new principles doesn't mean throwing out everything you know. Instead, it means thinking more creatively about how to apply those principles. Meet your prospects wherever they start their journeys and provide the resources and incentives to take the next step.

Let's say you're recruiting for a professional graduate program. It can be hard to identify prospects and predict when they are going to apply. In fact, they may not be sold on the idea of going to graduate school at all.

To reach prospects at this stage (**#1 on Figure 2**), you're going to have to cast a wide net, although not necessarily directly towards any previously identified group of prospects. Social media, public relations/earned media, and content marketing are good places to start. Focus on creating content that's useful to those who might be thinking about the next stage of their career and promote the concept that grad school might be a good option for professional growth. It doesn't even need to be branded content at this point. After all, you don't want them to perceive your content as "advertising." You're just trying to get some portion of your prospects to think, "Hey! Maybe I need to go to graduate school." Help them to embark on the graduate school journey.

The next group is beginning to explore its options (**#2 on Figure 2**). Don't assume they've got the same kind of knowledge about the professional graduate program marketplace that you do. That's a quick way to lose them. Instead, think of these prospects as explorers entering unknown territory.

How do you reach the explorers? Go to their main exploration vehicle: search engines. Targeted paid search and SEO based on keywords/phrases that neophytes might use will yield the best results. Optimizing for questions is a good tactic here: “What are the best business programs near me?” “What do I need to do to get into business school?” “Should I get an MBA or an MS degree?”

Give your explorers a destination designed for them. Don’t hit them over the head to take an action at this phase. They’re not ready yet. Instead, make sure that they can get the information they need to make a decision—costs, number of credits, platforms, mandatory tests, financial aid opportunities, etc.—and make it easy to find by putting it on the homepage of the programs you’re promoting. Of course, there’s nothing wrong with providing a link to an RFI page, but don’t shove it down their throats. They’re gathering information before they make a decision...and they’re gathering it from other schools, too. You don’t want prospects to remember your programs as the ones that couldn’t provide the information they needed.

Content marketing, out-of-home, and even targeted email are good tactics to try here, too. Provide content that helps them in their search, perhaps clearly explaining common jargon or providing a helpful general timeline/checklist they can use in their search. Out-of-home can help reinforce their thinking about graduate school and keep your brand top-of-mind, particularly if you use it to advertise something of value to them such as an open house. For explorers who have moved through their journey and have started to register for standardized tests (e.g. the GMAT), try sending direct mail to the list with content that reminds them of why your institution’s a good match. Provide information they need—for example, how to interpret your test scores—to help move them from being an explorer to someone ready to engage.

The engagement phase (**#3-4 on Figure 2**) is where a lot of your traditional recruitment marketing techniques come in...and where you’ll have to work in some new ones. Again, you can’t assume that someone is engaging with you because you moved them there: Think of all the “ghost applicants” you deal with. But here they are, and it’s time for you to help them make a difficult decision.

People who reach this phase are particularly delicate. What may have been an abstract concept (going to grad school) now has gotten real. They may have not even decided to go yet, but they’re certainly a lot closer. You need to help reinforce their decision to go to that next phase in their careers—and their lives. Make it easy for them to choose to apply to your institution.

To help them make that decision, get closer to them. Nurture the relationship. Personalized websites tailored to their interests, helpful emails reminding them of important dates, and long-form content about what to expect (especially if they’ve been out of school for a while) can all be helpful ways of showing that you know and care about them.

Social media is also a good channel to use at this stage, but carefully. Be available, both online and on the phone so they can answer questions when they ask them. You don't have to be available 24/7, either: set up "virtual office hours" for applicants who need last-minute help and then make yourself available. If done right, you'll overcome all the obstacles between someone who is engaged and someone who becomes an applicant.

Once they've applied (**#5 on Figure 2**), your job's not done: Even if they didn't apply anywhere else, they still could decide to walk away from the decision. Your goal here is to get them to enroll (**#6 on Figure 2**); keeping up that personal contact through the web, through email, over the phone, or through social media is key. It's an investment of time and resources that will pay big dividends when they enroll in your program.

We'll say it again: Just because they've applied doesn't mean they're going to enroll. As all higher ed marketers know, melt is a big problem, one made even bigger with the advent of the Common App and the ease of applying online. But if you've built relationships with your prospects as early as possible, been responsive, and assisted them with the process of applying you're going to have a much better chance keeping them once they've been accepted. "Melt" melts away with the application of sufficient attention.

Once they've accepted, it's all about their experience (**#7-9 on Figure 2**). We know that phrases such as "customer experience" can make many in the academic world head for the hills, but like it or not, they are your customer and you want to make their experience as rewarding as possible. You can enhance their experience as a student by staying in touch and letting them know that you still care after they've enrolled in your program. Occasional emails asking how things are going or offering advising help if they've run into a snag can have a big impact. Personalize the experience and let them know that they're not just a student ID number.

But while it's vital that you concentrate on their experience as a student, maintaining that relationship once they graduate is the key to creating a lifelong brand champion who's going to contribute as a donor, return (if possible) to earn more credits or even another degree, and -- perhaps most importantly -- someone who'll advocate for your institution for the rest of their lives, influencing future generations of customers (**#10 on Figure 2**).

When you create advocates, you reinforce the cycle, turning The Funnel into The Loop, an ongoing machine that generates prospects and, eventually, students.

But people will only advocate for you if they've had a good experience. Student life and their studies create that experience—and it's a part of your marketing. Social media (and online contacts in general) mean that the experience your students have is multiplied innumerable times by the people they come into contact with online. Their experiences, good and bad, will influence countless others. Why not create great experiences?

To do so, you're going to have to reach out across campus to *all* of the offices that interact with students. For undergrads, that means student Life, Career Services, the campus health resources, and recreation and wellness. For grad students, your efforts have to be more department-focused, but anything that helps build community and a connection to the program is worthwhile. For all students, make sure you include the faculty, too: If a member of your university interacts with students, plans events for students, teaches students, or helps students move on to a career, then they're involved in the overall "customer experience."

Your students are certainly there to learn, but they're also there to make connections, have life-altering experiences, live, play, and prepare for the rest of their lives. And while the student experience might seem well outside the realm of "marketing," turning students into lifelong advocates is really the best marketing activity you can do.

People stay at school because they feel like they "fit"; anything you can do to help enhance that fit—and enhance the overall experience of attending your institution—can help lower transfer rates and ultimately save recruitment costs. It's a lot easier to keep a student than it is to find a new one.

It's not enough to simply get prospects into the "Funnel" and move them along. You don't know who they are and when they're going to enter and you don't know when they're going to pay attention to your marketing efforts. Set your recruitment efforts free from practices that encourage marketers to sift prospects through a tired linear progression to a single and absolute end. That might have (kinda) worked in the Analog Age, but times have changed.

Forget the Funnel: Embrace The Loop.