

By Jessica B. Sandberg

# Personalizing Recruitment in the Digital Age

## Why Human Connection Still Matters

**THERE IS AN UNDENIABLE JOY** in the discovery of a new technological tool or gadget. It could be a chance to save time, increase personalization, or avoid boredom. After all, who wants to wait in the cold for a taxi when an app can locate an available ride-sharing service within minutes? Self-service, on-demand, and instant approval are hallmarks of the digital age.

Convenience is king—except when it isn't. When the desire is complex or underdeveloped, automation can fall short. For students, college selection involves a series of transactions that reflect a longer, more involved process, on the part of both the students and the institutions. Emotion is a factor in the choice, yet the process carries the same expectation for efficiency. Institutions must ensure that transactions are quick and intuitive, and there is no shortage of technological tools designed to support these efforts. However, the management of these tools can pull time and attention away from direct communication with students.

In the rush to meet the digital demand, especially in today's climate of uncertain perceptions about the United States, schools must not overlook the critical role of relationship building and personal connection in students' decisionmaking process. But what is the right balance between personalization (human connection) and personalization tools (technological enhancements) in finding and connecting with prospective international students? Several U.S. institutions have adopted strategies that prioritize personal connection in their recruitment plans.

### Achieving Face Time

When it comes to identifying students best matched for an institution, Nate Cronk of Canisius College explains that nothing is "as powerful or effective as meeting someone face to face." According to Cronk,



At New York University, a more personal approach to emailing prospective students yielded positive results.

time and budget for overseas travel is a top priority, and they should not be curtailed by the false promise of a technological shortcut. If institutions could send a legion of knowledgeable and friendly representatives across the globe to meet each prospective student in person, he says, there would be no challenge. In reality, even the most generously funded offices will not reach every prospect in their pool.

Luckily, face-to-face interactions do not always require travel. Many institutions use proxies such as alumni and faculty to expand their reach, and the key to successful use of such intermediaries is to develop and nurture relationships. Valuable surrogates are knowledgeable and invested; if neglected, they can counteract a school's efforts.

If physical proximity to prospective students is impossible, technology offers substitutes in the form of video calls, virtual meetings, instant messaging, text messaging, and small group forums. A simple phone call can also be powerful. If one-on-one connections are a priority, a blended approach of direct contact, virtual contact, and the use of surrogates can achieve this goal for institutions of varying sizes and budgets.

### Personalizing Communications

Face-to-face interaction may be the most valuable tool in relationship building, but indirect forms of student communication provide opportunities to convey feeling. Customer relationship management (CRM) and email management tools have made it easier than ever to send emails en masse—but a simple, personal message might have more impact.

When the admissions office at New York University (NYU) began to allocate more resources toward individual email replies, the results were positive, says Bobbe Fernando, senior assistant dean and director of global admissions at NYU. "Instead of sending out a uniform email to our international applicants telling them that we are missing something—for example, a transcript—we do personal outreach to all incomplete applicants," she says. "We have found that this more personal approach has led to more complete applications and less stressed applicants and counselors."

Recruiters have also learned that timeliness is a close cousin to personalization. When Andy Fraher served as director of the Center for International Programs and Services at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical

University, in Prescott, Arizona, staff used iPads to keep notes about conversations with students during recruiting events. Later, from their hotel rooms, recruiters wrote personal emails to the strongest prospects using the details collected. Feedback gathered at the time of enrollment consistently revealed that the personal and timely communications played a critical role in families' decisions to choose Embry-Riddle.

Some educators caution against relying too heavily on email, a form of communication rapidly fading in popularity among young people. The world of social media, on the other hand, is regional, generational, and ever changing. Vincent Flores, EducationUSA regional education advising coordinator for Northeast Asia, recommends tasking current international students with identifying the best mediums for each target market and allowing them to manage, with staff supervision, communications targeting prospective students. Flores believes that this approach is not only more efficient, but that student-to-student communication is often perceived as being more credible than a recruiter's polished talking points.

Still, there is a place for broadcast messaging in most recruitment strategies, especially for managing large volume communications such as reminders and for sharing institutional highlights. On the occasions when it is necessary, market segmentation can go a long way toward avoiding bland or tone-deaf messages. Segmented messages address the idiosyncratic needs, motivations, and concerns shared by students with similar backgrounds such as geographic region, academic profile, or any number of other groupings. (For in-depth information on segmentation and persona development for international student recruitment, see *NAFSA's Guide to International Student Recruitment, 3rd Edition*.)

## Additional Insights from the Field

"Get current students involved in recruitment. I've seen many creative ways to get students involved. One school has students create a parent newsletter, by country, with various news items and country-specific topics. Other schools use students to develop chat hours with prospective students. Let your students drive technology choices for communication. They will know if it should be WhatsApp, KakaoTalk, et cetera, or something else."

—Vincent Flores, EducationUSA

"Communicate with absolute integrity, especially when it comes to cost. Offer students a transparent cost and scholarship summary and help them compare your institution to others. Help students understand the budget and make value-based decisions."

—Andy Fraher, Embry-Riddle

"Let your recruiters do what they do best: interact with students. Where possible, free them from meetings and CRM management so they can create the moments of truth that influence student decisionmaking and set your school apart."

—Nate Cronk, Canisius College

### Creating Continuity

Many successful institutions develop personalization tactics in alignment with a core ethos. Faithfully executing an international enrollment management strategy that addresses the entire international student life cycle—from prospect to graduate—fosters long-term relationship building between staff and students.

At Embry-Riddle, Fraher began with the belief that all international student services are interconnected and that such services rely on counseling with integrity. He cross-trained staff to ensure that students worked with the same professionals from the time they were introduced to the school at a college fair to the day they began post-completion optional practical training (OPT).

"[Students] meet someone at a college fair and that [same] person and that office should be [available] for support throughout their time," Fraher says. "When they graduate, the same folks are there to celebrate with their parents." In this ambitious model, staff are organized around students instead of functions. Recalling the spirit of the "In Loco Parentis" doctrine, the emphasis on relationship building fosters lasting bonds and addresses the unique needs of students who are far removed from their family and culture.

### Striking a Balance

As higher education surveys continue to report sluggish international enrollment figures, the push toward an efficiency-minded bottom line has amplified. Educators must find a way to meet that demand without blemishing the student-centered environment for which U.S. colleges and universities are known.

"The challenge of the tech revolution is that we haven't yet figured out how to be efficient without treating people like products in the manner of the industrial revolution," says Cronk at Canisius College. "People aren't Model Ts." Emerging technologies can substitute, mimic, or support human interaction; however, finding the right balance is a tricky matter. If technology and related decisions are viewed through the lens of true personalization, the human experience will be sustained. ■

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### NAFSA RESOURCES

*International Enrollment Management Strategic Planning: An Integrated Approach:* [bit.ly/IEMplanning](http://bit.ly/IEMplanning)

*NAFSA's Guide to International Student Recruitment, 3rd Edition:* [bit.ly/GuideISR](http://bit.ly/GuideISR)