

A young man with dark hair is shown in profile, looking down at a book he is holding. He is in a library, with rows of bookshelves filled with books visible in the background. The lighting is soft, and the overall tone is academic and focused.

# INBOUND MARKETING STRATEGIES FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

---

DEVELOPING DIGITAL STRATEGIES TO ATTRACT, ENGAGE,  
AND NURTURE TODAY'S PROSPECTIVE STUDENT AUDIENCES

**OLIVE & CO**  
STAND OUT AND CONNECT

## INDEX

<b>HOW TO GET THE MOST OUT OF THIS EBOOK</b>	<b>03</b>	<b>&gt;</b>
<b>OVERCOMING HIGHER ED MARKETING CHALLENGES</b>	<b>04</b>	<b>&gt;</b>
<b>WHAT IS INBOUND MARKETING?</b>	<b>06</b>	<b>&gt;</b>
<b>IS INBOUND MARKETING RIGHT FOR MY INSTITUTION?</b>	<b>08</b>	<b>&gt;</b>
<b>SETTING GOALS</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>&gt;</b>
<b>CREATING PERSONAS</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>&gt;</b>
<b>MAPPING YOUR PROSPECTIVE STUDENT JOURNEY</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>&gt;</b>
<b>ASSESSING YOUR CONTENT</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>&gt;</b>
<b>THE INBOUND MARKETING STRATEGY BLUEPRINT</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>&gt;</b>
<b>GETTING STARTED</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>&gt;</b>

# HOW TO GET THE MOST OUT OF THIS EBOOK

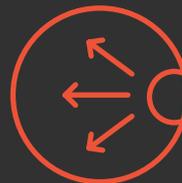
---

Before diving into inbound marketing, here's a quick look at how to best utilize this ebook. We created an informative and actionable format to advance your understanding of inbound marketing and help you apply that knowledge to your own marketing strategy. There are two types of sections you'll encounter:



## FUNDAMENTALS

The Fundamentals sections guide you through inbound marketing theory to help you understand how the methodology can work for colleges and universities. This information is provided to help you fully understand how your internal team and prospective students can benefit from implementing the methodology.



## PROCESSES

The Processes sections help you apply inbound principles to your marketing efforts by drawing on the information provided in the Fundamentals sections. Each section will walk you through the process of creating tangible deliverables that can be leveraged to meet your marketing and enrollment goals.

# OVERCOMING HIGHER ED MARKETING CHALLENGES

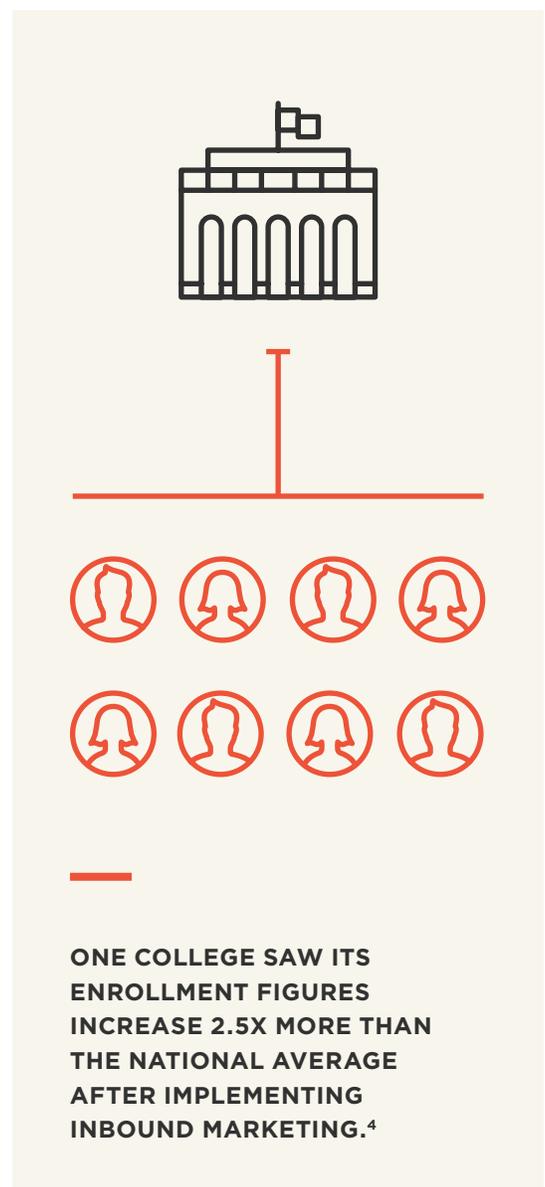
Working at a college or university today presents a combination of challenges never before seen in the history of higher education in America.

Since 2010, more students than ever before are graduating high school, but fewer and fewer of them are going on to enroll in postsecondary education.<sup>1</sup> Around half of the students who do enroll drop out or put their studies on hold before actually earning a degree or credential.<sup>2</sup> And of those who do graduate, 70 percent will have financed all or part of their degree through student loans, which saddles new graduates with debt before they're able to build a financial foundation for themselves.<sup>3</sup>

These factors weigh heavily on the minds of prospective college students and contribute to growing numbers of them pursuing academic opportunities outside traditional postsecondary education; In some cases, they're second-guessing the value of a college degree altogether.

Meanwhile, higher education marketing departments across the country are seeing enrollment goals grow, marketing budgets shrink or stagnate, and a multitude of modalities by which students can earn a degree. Traditional four-year colleges are seeing career colleges, trade schools, community colleges, and online colleges cut into their once-dominant share of degree seekers.

The bottom line is this: Regardless of category, higher ed institutions are working harder and harder to compete for a pool of candidates that is savvy, selective, and shrinking. Targeting the right audience is only the tip of the iceberg.



If you're like our higher education clients, the biggest challenges you face include:

- Standing out in an increasingly competitive landscape
- Combating declining enrollment trends
- Connecting with diverse, nontraditional audiences
- Battling misconceptions about the value of a degree
- Proving the value of new or innovative marketing initiatives
- Achieving objectives with limited marketing resources

Overcoming these challenges may seem like a daunting task, but we're here to help. The right marketing approach can help you better connect with your audience, communicate your school's unique story, participate in open and constructive dialogue, and ultimately, meet your institutional goals.

Since the early 2000s, a marketing methodology called "inbound marketing" has been proving its value in the higher education sphere. It's a strategy based on attracting prospective students by creating informative content, optimizing it for maximum performance, measuring the results of your efforts, and applying those learnings to future initiatives.

One Tennessee-based college saw enrollment increase 2.5 times more than the national average after implementing inbound marketing. All told, it saw a 225 percent return on its inbound marketing investment.<sup>4</sup>

We'll use this ebook to dig deeper into inbound strategies; identify ways for you to build your own process; and explore opportunities for you to use the methodology to overcome the unique challenges facing your college or university.

"The mandate for all institutions has evolved—and that includes higher education. Therefore, our old way of working as communicators and marketers simply cannot succeed. In this moment, what is necessary is a more ambitious role for higher education, to build authentic engagement with society, to reimagine your role, to have a greater impact on real world issues."<sup>5</sup>

– Richard Edelman

1. <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/>

2. <http://americanradioworks.publicradio.org/features/tomorrows-college/dropouts/>

3. <https://www.rand.org/blog/2017/05/is-college-worth-the-expense-yes-it-is.html>

4. <https://www.hubspot.com/customers/maryville-college>

5. <http://www.edelman.com/post/richard-edelman-rise-of-fifth-estate-speech/>



## FUNDAMENTALS: WHAT IS INBOUND MARKETING?

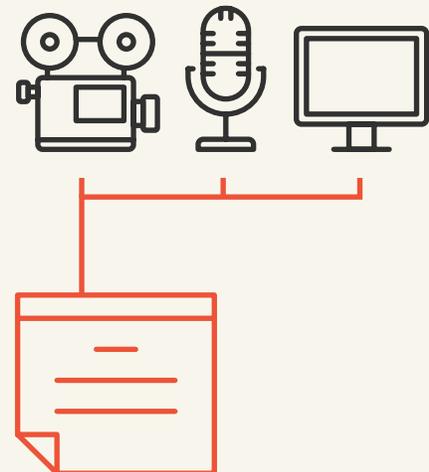
In simplest terms, inbound marketing is a digital marketing methodology that leverages quality content, search engine optimization, and lead nurturing tactics to attract consumers to your brand and keep it top of mind as they are making buying decisions.

Inbound marketing enables college marketing teams to entice and engage audiences by creating content that provides objective, trustworthy answers to the questions they're asking at each stage of the buyer journey. For colleges and universities, inbound marketing is about empowering prospective students, and the people that influence them, to make informed decisions about their academic futures.

Inbound does this by leading prospective students through four phases—attract, convert, close, and delight—that are designed to transform them from strangers, to prospects, to engaged students, to proud alumni and advocates for your school. As an inbound marketer, you'll create and deliver content that is strategically aimed at the appropriate stage for that particular person or segment of users. Meanwhile, you'll collect data, track performance of your content, and optimize it to ensure it resonates with the right audience at the right time.

### WHY IS INBOUND MARKETING ESSENTIAL?

You likely have a marketing strategy in place that has served your college for years. A strategy comprised of basic digital marketing tactics like social media and a pay-per-click



### WHAT ABOUT MY OUTBOUND MARKETING STRATEGIES?

Though inbound is a powerful tool, it shouldn't be the only one in the marketer's toolbox. You don't need to chuck your proven strategies out the window. Inbound marketing can be used to complement your other marketing efforts.

(PPC) campaign alongside traditional marketing like direct mail, billboard buys, radio spots, and television commercials. You probably know exactly what you can and cannot expect from your marketing efforts. So, why are we recommending you evolve your strategy? Because students demand it.

Most of your prospective students grew up on technology; they're digitally savvy, they want information immediately, and they're comfortable using search engines to find answers to their questions. Yours is a target audience that can expertly spot sponsored content, can deftly defy traditional advertising, and is married to its mobile devices.

#### MODERN AUDIENCE BEHAVIOR

<b>86%</b>	of people skip TV ads <sup>6</sup>
<b>44%</b>	of direct mail is never opened <sup>6</sup>
<b>84%</b>	of audiences 25-34 years old have left a favorite website due to intrusive advertising <sup>7</sup>

### INBOUND MARKETING IS A PROVEN STRATEGY

By carefully creating content and distributing it on the right platforms at the right time, you're meeting your consumers where they're most comfortable and you're enticing them to connect with you. Rather than pushing your messaging on people through traditional marketing methods, you're pulling prospects toward your brand because of the quality of information you're providing.

You'll create blog posts, landing pages, social media, videos, infographics, ebooks, and white papers to provide the best answers to the questions your audience is asking. In doing so, you'll build credibility and authority for your institution, which then builds trust in your brand. By becoming a resource for your audience, you'll be top of mind when prospective students are ready to make an enrollment decision.

#### INBOUND STATISTICS FOR HIGHER ED

<b>97%</b>	of students find college websites to be reliable sources of information <sup>6</sup>
<b>3x</b>	Inbound leads are 3x more qualified than applicants acquired through traditional methods <sup>8</sup>
<b>7x</b>	Schools using inbound marketing are 7x more likely to report higher ROI than schools using outbound marketing <sup>8</sup>

What's more, inbound marketing produces more leads, which improves the ROI of your marketing efforts, and it *costs less*. That's right, inbound marketing costs on average 61 percent less, per lead, than traditional marketing.<sup>9</sup>

In the immortal words of New York Times bestselling author and all around marketing guru, Guy Kawasaki, "If you've got more money than brains, use outbound marketing. If you've got more brains than money, focus on inbound marketing."

6. <http://www.slideshare.net/Intead/contextual-marketingforhighereducation>

7. <http://mashable.com/2011/10/30/inbound-outbound-marketing/>

8. <https://cdn2.hubspot.net/hubfs/53/Education/TheUltimateGuideToInboundMarketingForSchools.pdf>

9. <https://blog.hubspot.com/blog/tabid/6307/bid/31555/Inbound-Leads-Cost-61-Less-Than-Outbound-New-Data>



## FUNDAMENTALS:

# IS INBOUND MARKETING RIGHT FOR MY INSTITUTION?

Higher education institutions are positioned perfectly to reap the benefits of inbound marketing. The inbound methodology is built around creating content that answers the questions consumers are asking and—because current and prospective students spend significant amounts of time and energy comparing and contrasting academic options—it offers a great way to attract, entice, engage, and retain them.

Equally as important, inbound marketing provides a mechanism through which colleges and universities can reinforce their values, communicate their philosophies, and share the student experiences that are relevant to prospective students considering their institution.

### INBOUND MARKETING FOR 4-YEAR COLLEGES

Students considering these schools are most likely between the ages of 18-24 at the time of matriculation and they spend time—perhaps more than any other cohort of prospective students—comparing and contrasting their options. Inbound marketing can help four-year schools differentiate themselves in the minds of prospective students by showcasing the unique convergence of academic, geographic, social, and extracurricular experiences offered.

### INBOUND MARKETING FOR FAITH-BASED COLLEGES

Students considering faith-based colleges often do so because the values around which the school was built resonate with their own values and inspire them to continue their spiritual journey alongside their academic one. Inbound marketing can help communicate those messages to prospective students and position their academic experience as a launching pad for a life of success, service, and stewardship.

### INBOUND MARKETING FOR CREATIVE ARTS COLLEGES

Students considering these institutions are seeking a traditional academic experience that prepares them for nontraditional, creative arts careers. Inbound marketing can help highlight the multitude of academic opportunities that exist in these fields, share student success stories, and illustrate the types of careers available to creative and interdisciplinary arts degree holders.



## FUNDAMENTALS:

# IS INBOUND MARKETING RIGHT FOR MY INSTITUTION?

### INBOUND MARKETING FOR COMMUNITY COLLEGES

Students considering community colleges aren't looking for destination campuses—they want academic options that are close to the places they already live, work, and play. Community colleges are relying more and more heavily on inbound marketing to refute the stigma of being the “fallback” options for students on the academic bubble. To do so, they're using inbound to illustrate the multitude of programs available and highlight the advantages of a quality education within close proximity to home.

### INBOUND MARKETING FOR TRADE SCHOOLS

Students considering these schools often do so because the length of time to completion is shorter, their career path is chosen prior to matriculation, and the hands-on learning style is more attractive than classroom-based lectures. Inbound marketing that integrates visual content can be very effective in helping illustrate the advantages of trade schools, the hands-on learning environment available, and career outlook information to help them decide on the right path for them.

### INBOUND MARKETING FOR CAREER COLLEGES

Career colleges were among the first higher ed institutions to adopt inbound marketing strategies to recruit new students. In addition to helping meet enrollment goals, some of these schools have used inbound effectively to battle misconceptions about the value of the degrees they offer.

Students considering these schools often do so because they offer attractive modalities—i.e., fully online or hybrid online/onsite degrees—designed for speed and convenience. Inbound marketing can help communicate the ways in which a college degree can help busy professionals advance in their current career or change to a more lucrative or satisfying one.

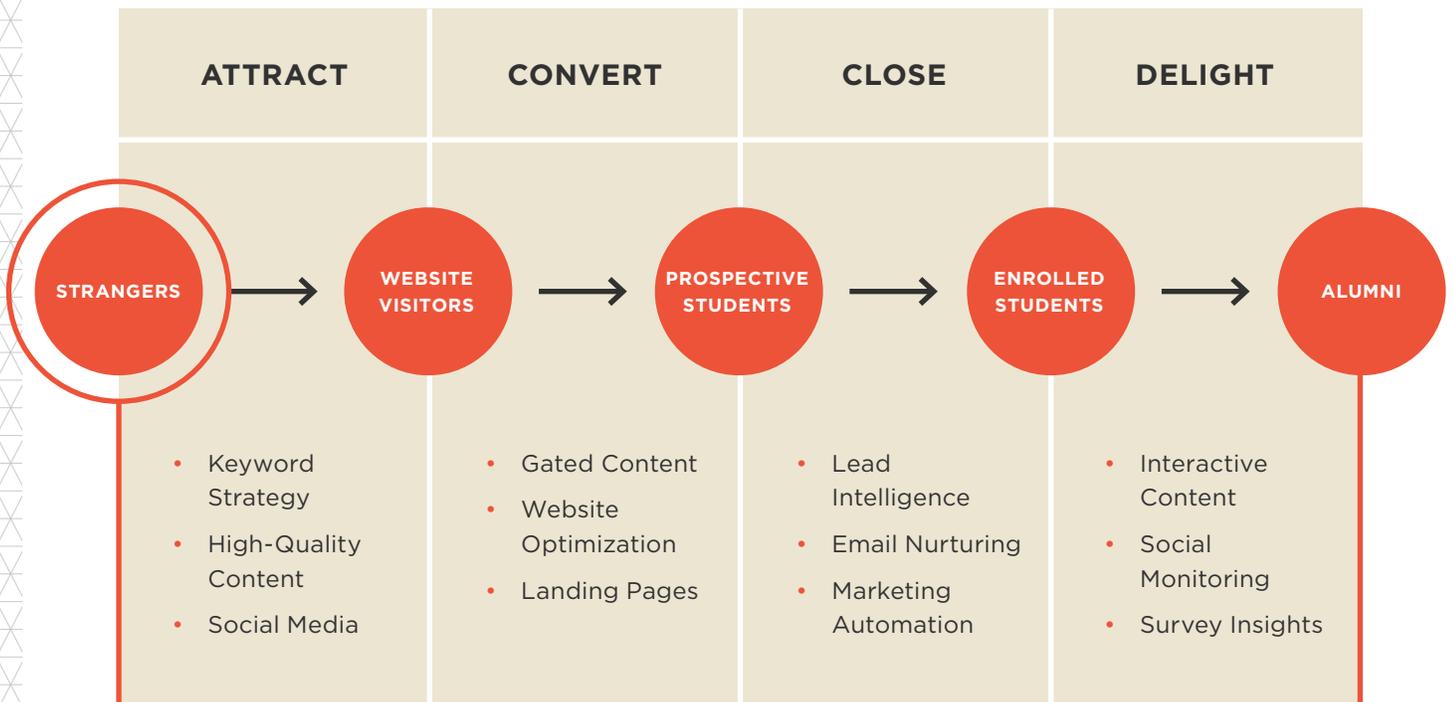
### INBOUND MARKETING FOR GRADUATE PROGRAMS

Students considering graduate degrees often do so because they want to help advance a field of study or achieve a level of professional development or prestige. Inbound marketing can help attract and entice new students by showcasing the sense of personal accomplishment, the cutting-edge facilities and research, and the professional advantages inherent in earning an advanced degree.



## FUNDAMENTALS: THE INBOUND MARKETING METHODOLOGY

Now that you've been introduced to inbound marketing and understand why it is essential to higher ed marketing teams, let's dive into the methodology that makes it so successful. To recap, inbound marketing involves creating relevant content that empowers prospective students to make informed decisions about their academic futures. This approach consists of four phases.



## 1 ATTRACT

The attract phase of the inbound methodology uses content to answer the questions people are asking about higher education online and in search engines. You're meeting strangers where they are in their journey and attracting them to your website. By being a source of objective information for this audience, you're building credibility for your school and trust in your brand.

## 2 CONVERT

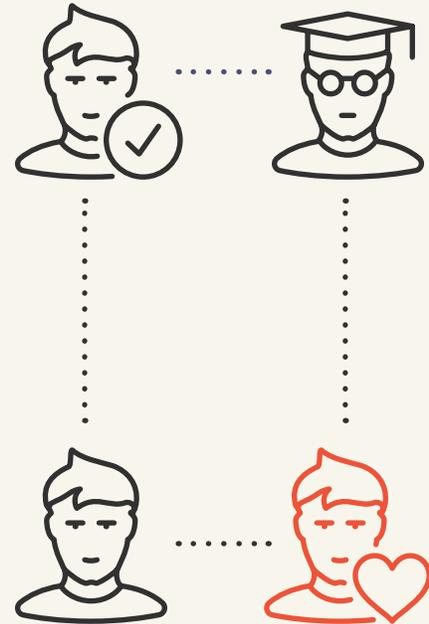
The goal of the convert stage is to transform website visitors into prospective students. Landing pages containing relevant, non-promotional content offers, RFI forms, and enticing CTAs are used to gather personal information from visitors interested in engaging with your school. This is the stage in which you identify the "right" leads for your particular institution.

## 3 CLOSE

The close phase is where prospective students become applicants, and ultimately, enrolled students. Personalized email campaigns, branded content, and direct social media interaction can be used to help prospects make enrollment decisions and nurture them as they progress toward matriculation.

## 4 DELIGHT

The inbound marketing methodology doesn't end after the student decides to enroll. The delight phase is all about building long-lasting relationships with your students, alumni, and community members so they ultimately become advocates for your institution. Relationship-building surveys, social media, alumni outreach, and email newsletters can all be used to drive advocacy.



### WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN CONTENT MARKETING AND INBOUND MARKETING?

It's important to clarify, inbound marketing is not the same as content marketing, rather, one is a component of the other. Content marketing is about creating and curating content to encourage users to take a specific action. Inbound marketing, on the other hand, is a methodology that uses various marketing tactics—content, email, SEO, social media, to name a few—at strategic points in the buyer journey to transform visitors into applicants, applicants into students, and students into advocates for your institution. Each phase of the inbound methodology relies on content marketing to move prospective students through the buyer journey.



## PROCESSES: SETTING GOALS

A crucial component of inbound marketing is identifying the metrics that will help define success or failure of your strategy. Metrics that colleges and universities find valuable often include traffic, leads, starts, enrolls, time on page, page depth, click-through rate, new versus repeat visitors, bounce rate, and comments.

Once you identify the right metrics, you can begin tracking the performance of specific sections of your site, categories of pages, individual pieces of content, and anything else that helps you understand whether or not your inbound efforts are working. The end goal is to gather the type of data that yields insights and, ultimately, drives institutional decisions.

Keep in mind, the goals you set should be SMART—specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, timely. There are a lot of components contributing to the success or failure of your marketing efforts, and you need to be able to quickly and easily separate strategies that work from those that don't. SMART goals will help make sure you're positioned to reach the right audiences at the right time.

### 1 GOALS SHOULD ALWAYS BE SMART

#### SPECIFIC

Communicates who, what, where, when, and why.

#### MEASURABLE

Possible to track progress for data.

#### ATTAINABLE

Realistically achievable for your team.

#### RELEVANT

Addresses core business and brand objectives.

#### TIMELY

Includes finite date to complete the goal.

#### EXAMPLE SMART GOAL

Increase starts 3 percent year-over-year by the end of the 2018 admissions cycle.

## 2

### INVOLVE THE 'RIGHT' STAKEHOLDERS IN YOUR PROCESS

It's important to share your plan with internal stakeholders to gain alignment and ensure your goals are comprehensive, but don't overdo it. You don't want to solicit feedback from everyone from marketing to administration to faculty to admissions. You just need to make sure that the stakeholders directly impacted by your plan—and those responsible for approving or denying it—have been consulted and been given a chance to provide input. This ensures internal buy-in while also protecting your plan from arbitrary or subjective preferences.

## 3

### DEFINE YOUR GOALS

Once the right stakeholders are involved in the goal-setting process, host a brainstorm session to delve into the reasons for building an inbound marketing strategy and how it will benefit the school. This is a good opportunity to identify and address areas of confusion or misunderstanding, as well as gain further alignment. Let these three questions guide your brainstorm session.



#### QUESTION 1

#### WHAT IS THE CURRENT STATE OF YOUR MARKETING?

It is very important that the answer to this question is candid. It doesn't help to sugarcoat anything at this stage. An honest assessment here will help you create SMART goals that can be applied across the institution.



#### QUESTION 2

#### WHAT ARE YOUR MARKETING, ADMISSIONS, AND ENROLLMENT GOALS?

Your answer may be to attract more prospective students, drive brand awareness, or be seen as a pillar in your community. Whatever your goals are, the answer to this question will drive your entire strategy, so be thorough, and make sure to document them clearly.



#### QUESTION 3

#### WHICH METRICS WILL BEST ILLUSTRATE SUCCESS OR FAILURE?

To identify meaningful metrics you need to know what is worth measuring. If you can't answer the following questions about your school's marketing efforts, these might be metrics you want to measure:

1. How much traffic is your website driving?
2. How many leads are you generating from the site per month?
3. What is the lifetime value of a lead at your college?
4. What is the open rate of your email newsletter?
5. How do current numbers compare to historical data?

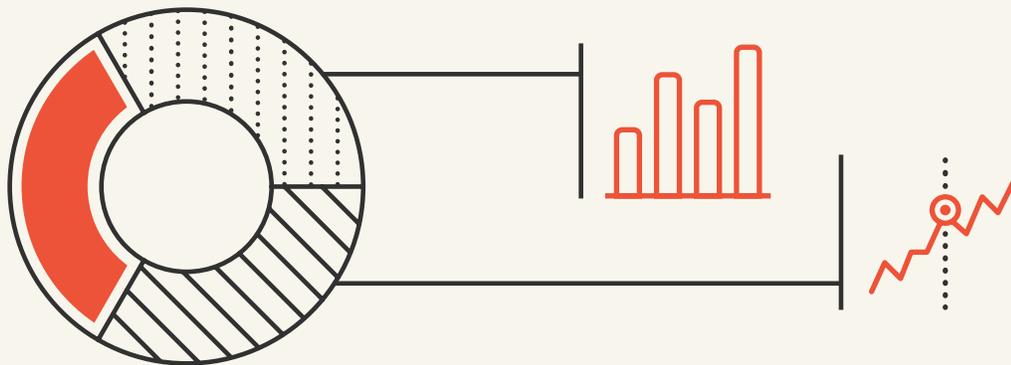
## 4 DOCUMENT YOUR GOALS

Don't make the mistake of letting a great brainstorm session be reduced to vague recollections or cobbled together in an endless email stream. Be intentional about documenting your goals. If necessary, invite someone to your brainstorm session whose sole purpose is to record insights and assign action items afterwards. If you used a whiteboard for your session, before erasing it, use your smartphone to take a picture of it and send it to meeting attendees. Documenting your goals will ensure your inbound strategy has a clear purpose and will establish a path to success.

## 5 GET THE LARGER TEAM ON BOARD

Once you've documented your goals, share them across all stakeholder teams. Documented goals keep everyone on the same page and accountable for success or failure. Communicating throughout the process is especially important if inbound is a new marketing approach for your team.

The SMART goals you set will inform every strategic inbound marketing decision you make and they will be used to evaluate the effectiveness of your inbound efforts. Keep in mind, inbound is a complex process built around human behavior so you may not reach your goals right away. It requires testing, analysis, reiteration, and ongoing optimization. That means you'll adjust your goals as you go and continuously work toward better results.



### HOW DO I KNOW IF I AM REACHING MY GOALS?

Essential components of inbound marketing are collecting data, measuring performance, drawing insights from your data, and assessing progress toward your goals. If you don't have a data expert on your team, don't worry. Use an inbound platform like HubSpot to document your goals and execute on your inbound marketing strategy.

With many platforms, you'll automatically receive analytics, including website traffic, email click-through rate, time on site, and bounce rate. After reviewing site performance, feel free to adjust your goals and alter your campaigns to consistently improve your inbound efforts.



## PROCESSES: CREATING PERSONAS

To effectively create content that is optimized for each stage of the enrollment journey, you need to know what types of content and messages will resonate with the various segments within your target audience. This knowledge comes from understanding your audience's wants, needs, challenges, pain points, motivations, and goals. This information is documented in the form of personas.

### WHAT ARE PERSONAS?

Personas are archetypes of the various people you're targeting with your marketing. Personas are created using a combination of quantitative and qualitative data analysis that allows you to understand your consumers' online behavior and use it to predict future interactions.

For example, if one of the populations you're trying to target is Generation Z consumers (i.e., those born after 1999), the persona you create should embody the shared characteristics and concerns that define them—e.g., social justice, activism, volunteering, digital multitasking, entrepreneurship, and privacy. As a higher education institution, your consumers might all be Gen Z'ers, but the information that motivates, frustrates, and resonates with them may be different based on their specific concerns and life experiences. So the content that appeals, attracts, and entices them also needs to be different.

Segmenting personas based on shared characteristics and concerns, rather than deferring simply to age, race, gender, or

geography-based demographics, builds a better connection between you and your audience, and drives more effective content creation.

### HOW TO BUILD PERSONAS

#### 1 CONDUCT RESEARCH

Conduct research to figure out who is already interacting with your brand. Talk to admissions teams, study your social media interactions, look at your website analytics. Ask questions about your audience's wants and needs in relation to the college selection process:

- What causes them stress?
- What does a day in their life look like?
- What are their challenges and pain points?
- How do they find and share information?
- What common questions do they have?

## 2

### IDENTIFY YOUR TARGET AUDIENCE

Identify your target audience in its broadest sense, e.g., “prospective students.” Segment it into multiple personas you can use to develop specific insight into their wants, needs, goals, challenges, etc. In this example, your personas could include:

- Gen Z’ers
- Single parents
- Career changers
- Adult learners

## 3

### BUILD PERSONAS

Use creativity, insights, and data to define the common challenges, desires, and questions each of your segments share. Build profiles around those characteristics. Combine a name, photo, age, gender, and bio with each segments’ wants, needs, challenges, preferences, sources of information, influencers, and any other information that is relevant to their decision-making process. Your personas will start to take shape as you identify areas of distinction and overlap between them.

## 4

### USE PERSONAS TO ACHIEVE BUSINESS GOALS

Once you build and document your personas, share them with your larger marketing, admissions, enrollment, and leadership teams. The work you do at this stage should be used to inform future marketing materials, campaigns, and collateral. Keep in mind, as time passes and organizational priorities shift, audiences may change. Use the data you collect from your inbound efforts to update your personas as they evolve.

### EXAMPLE PERSONA

**Marcus, Prospective Student**

**BIO**  
Marcus needs a school that offers flexible class schedules that work around his day job. He wants a degree program that will help him find an internship where he can gain hands-on experience. He doesn't want to take on student loans, so he must work while also attending school. He enjoys going to art-house movies on the weekends and values people who are honest and dependable. Marcus is skeptical about choosing a school that doesn't deliver on its promises, resulting in wasted time and money.

**SOURCES**

- College collateral (e.g., websites, blogs, newsletters, campus booklets) (print and online)
- Higher education publications (e.g., journals, college ranking lists, blogs) (print and online)
- Community publications (print and online)
- College fairs
- Social media
- Friends & family

**MOTIVATIONS**

- Flexibility
- Career advancement
- Affordability
- Dependability
- Valuable education

**CHALLENGES**

- Limited time to search for options
- Lack of awareness on available programs
- Lack of information on local college
- Peers' negative perceptions of community colleges
- Anxiety about making the wrong decision

**Age** 18  
**Salary** \$12/hour  
**Gender** Male  
**Hometown** Brooklyn, NY

> Creative  
> Hard-Working  
> Entrepreneurial

**NEXT STEPS**  
Search for information (mostly online) about programs that match needs and local schools that host quality programs.



## FUNDAMENTALS:

# MAPPING YOUR PROSPECTIVE STUDENT JOURNEY

Now that you've defined your target audience, and have begun building out personas, one of the key components to segmenting your audience is recognizing their unique journey, or, the individual factors that influence the decisions they make.

Fully understanding the prospective student journey will help you design an inbound strategy that resonates with the audience you're targeting at the time they're searching for information. Each persona within your audience will likely experience a different journey, so it's important to think critically and creatively when defining them.

## THE INBOUND METHODOLOGY VS. THE PROSPECTIVE STUDENT JOURNEY

Understanding the relationship between the inbound methodology and the prospective student journey is vital to developing a targeted inbound strategy.

The inbound methodology—attract, convert, close, and delight—outlines the selling process higher ed marketers use to transform strangers into students, and alumni into advocates. The prospective student journey—awareness, consideration, decision—is the internal thought process a person works through as they compare their higher education needs with the college or university that best meets those needs.

As you're ushering prospective students through the inbound stages, they may be in different stages of their own journey. Each persona moves through the journey at their own pace so some may take longer to consider, while others may jump quickly to a decision. Inbound content should be created to help guide students through their decision-making process by providing the information they're seeking.

### IS SELECTING A COLLEGE A PURCHASE DECISION?

Choosing a college is a purchasing decision—a highly important and emotional decision, with a large price tag to boot. Prospective students choose from a large pool of potential colleges that meet their academic needs. When they choose to apply and eventually enroll, they are purchasing academic services that can impact the rest of their lives. By understanding the prospective student journey, you can use your marketing efforts to help guide this life-changing decision process.

## STAGES OF THE PROSPECTIVE STUDENT JOURNEY



### AWARENESS

Experiencing  
problem/pondering  
opportunity

During the first stage of their journey, your personas are only tangentially aware they have a need to fulfill or an opportunity to pursue (e.g., I want a sense of accomplishment). Sometimes, people in this stage just know they need a change. They're not looking for solutions in the awareness stage, they're merely exploring their situation at an abstract level and are trying to fully understand the next step that makes the most sense for them. Top-of-funnel content that is non-promotional and designed to spark interest, entertain, or answer a basic question is what resonates best with visitors in this stage.



### CONSIDERATION

Considering/  
comparing options

The consideration stage is when visitors fully understand and can articulate their need or problem. They are actively researching means and methods to answer their question, meet their need, or solve their problem (e.g., Does degree A or degree B have a better career outlook?). This is the stage in which visitors become prospective students and begin separating the colleges they're interested in from those they aren't. It's important to note, prospective students in this stage are keeping their options open and are gathering information, so content here should be thorough and comprehensive. Middle-of-funnel content designed to educate readers and answer multiple questions will resonate best with prospects in this stage.



### DECISION

Taking action to  
solve problem/pursue  
opportunity

The decision stage is when prospective students will create a short list of options that best meet their academic and situational needs (e.g., Local colleges and universities that offer generous financial aid packages). At this stage, relevant, promotional, personalized materials will help the students finalize their short list and, ideally, apply to your college. It's important to note, even in decision stage, prospective students are likely considering more than one college. Bottom-of-funnel content that reinforces your value proposition and highlights the myriad opportunities available to students enrolled at your college is what will resonate best in this stage.



## PROCESSES: ASSESSING YOUR CONTENT

Before you can start executing your content-fueled inbound marketing strategy, it's important to know what assets you're already working with. Inbound is about content and context: That means publishing the right type of content at the right time for the right person, so you need to have a handle on what content is available to your marketing team and where gaps exist.

### WHAT IS AN INBOUND CONTENT AUDIT?

An inbound content audit is a process of thoroughly exploring your existing content assets and identifying opportunities for content creation. It will help you develop a strategy for delivering content at each stage of the inbound methodology.

### HOW TO AUDIT YOUR CONTENT

#### 1 LOCATE YOUR EXISTING INBOUND CONTENT

You're looking for digital content at this point. It can include your website, landing pages, blog posts, interactive tools, ebooks, white papers, emails, and social media. This is not meant to be a comprehensive audit of all organizational content, so don't spend time looking at direct mail, print ads, radio spots, or billboard buys at this point.

#### 2 DOCUMENT EXISTING CONTENT IN A SPREADSHEET

Catalog location, format, author, persona, purpose, keywords targeted (if applicable),

corresponding stage of the inbound methodology, and quality. This may sound exhaustive but, the more thorough you are at this stage, the easier it will be to identify gaps and build a strategy to fill them.

#### 3 PERFORM A COMPETITIVE ANALYSIS

Competitor analyses help you understand the means and methods other schools are using to reach prospective students. You should always strive to publish high-quality, unique content, but competitor sites can give you insight into other content strategies, which can help inform yours. What type of content do they have on their website? Is it unique? Is it high-quality? Do they have a strong social presence? Do they have premium content offers? How frequently do they publish new posts on their blog? What keywords and topics are they using to reach their audience?

## EXTRA CREDIT

While a content assessment can stop here, we recommend taking it a few steps further. The below tasks will help you when you're putting together your strategic inbound marketing blueprint, which we'll cover in the next chapter.

### 4 LIST CONTENT OPPORTUNITIES

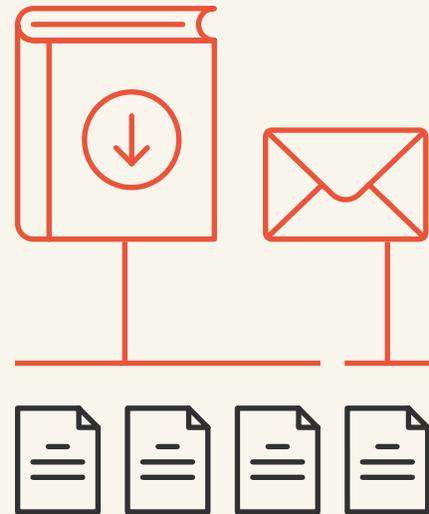
- Map out each stage of the inbound methodology
- List the type of content needed to convert at each stage

### 5 DETERMINE CONTENT ASSETS AND OPPORTUNITIES

- Cross-reference your existing content and your content opportunities
- Document content that can be repurposed and improved
- Document content that needs to be created

### 6 PRIORITIZE YOUR CONTENT PLAN

- Start with the most immediate needs (e.g., website copy)
- Move on to repurposed content opportunities (e.g., consolidate multiple blog posts into a white paper)
- Finish with new content creation objectives



### REPURPOSED CONTENT

Repurposed content is adjusted, updated, or reformatted content that fulfills a new purpose. You can repurpose content to reach new audiences on different platforms, maximize the life cycle of existing content, or improve the effectiveness a particular campaign.

#### COMMON REPURPOSING OPPORTUNITIES:

- Consolidate multiple blog posts into an ebook
- Replace outdated statistics and sources in old blog posts to maximize search equity
- Build an interactive checklist tool from bullet points featured in a presentation deck
- Create an infographic using statistics cited throughout a series of blog posts
- Use social media posts to drive audiences to newly created premium content



## FUNDAMENTALS:

# THE INBOUND MARKETING STRATEGY BLUEPRINT

An inbound marketing blueprint outlines your entire inbound marketing strategy. A blueprint includes the goals for your inbound strategy and the metrics you'll use to measure success.

It holds the research insights that will drive your inbound decisions and it dictates your plan of attack for developing content that reaches prospective students. A strategy blueprint includes everything you and your teams need to succeed at inbound marketing.

### ELEMENTS OF A STRATEGY BLUEPRINT

A strategy blueprint includes a few items we've already discussed: SMART goals, audience personas, and a content audit. In addition, there are several components that should also be included in your blueprint:



#### KEYWORD PLAN

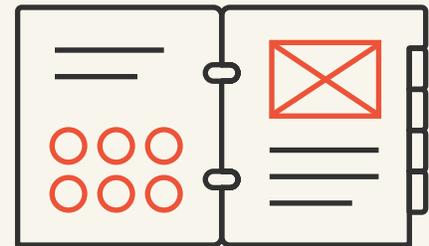
Keyword research defines how your prospective students use search engines to find answers to the questions they're asking. It includes the broad terms they search in the awareness stage as well as the long-tail phrases and questions they search in consideration and decision stages. Within the blueprint, you'll provide guidelines for how and when to incorporate keywords in your content.



#### TECHNOLOGY PLAN

A technology plan outlines the technologies,

(continued)



#### BRAND EDITORIAL GUIDELINES DOCUMENT

Along with your inbound strategy blueprint, you'll want to create a brand editorial guidelines document. This includes logo, voice, personality, and visual information about your college or university. Having a document like this will ensure your admissions, marketing, and enrollment teams, along with other contributors and resources, will be on the same page when creating content for your school.

tools, and digital platforms you'll need to successfully track and measure the impact of your inbound marketing strategy. Ask yourself what tools you currently have and which ones could better serve your needs. Tools can include a content management system, student relationship management platform, and an email automation system. Consider adopting a closed-loop marketing platform to track your enrollment data. A closed-loop platform automatically records interactions with your prospective students, so you can prove the value of your marketing efforts.



#### **CAMPAIGN PLAN**

A campaign plan outlines single, specific sprints for implementing and augmenting your inbound strategy. These plans work toward your overall inbound goals, but contain their own, more specific success metrics. Campaign plans have a start and an end date, and a theme to unite the campaign and its deliverables. Within your plan, you'll identify the goal of the campaign and outline the types of content, offers, and actions that will help you achieve them. Campaign plans are critical to the success of any inbound strategy.



#### **LEAD NURTURING PLAN**

The decision you're asking prospective students to make is a big one. It's potentially life-changing and it can take a long time. The reality is that your prospects may change their minds about your school, get cold feet, or simply decide the timing isn't right for college. That's natural. You can expect to lose a certain percentage of accepted students prior to enrollment—you will even see a small drop off between those enrolling at the school and those starting classes. That's why it's so important to have a lead nurturing plan. Email campaigns

that provide encouragement and reassurance, care packages that include hand-written welcome notes and campus swag, and direct social media engagement are all effective ways to nurture your prospects as they progress toward matriculation.



#### **RESOURCE PLAN**

Resource planning helps you determine what resources you have available to contribute to your inbound content. Contributors can include current faculty, students, and community partners. A strategy blueprint contains a log of these contributors, how they might be able to help, and how often they are expected to contribute (i.e., faculty guest blogging once per month, students managing social media communities on a daily basis, the math department conducting statistical analysis of competitor content once per year, etc.).



#### **EXECUTION PLAN**

Building a plan to execute on your newly implemented inbound strategy is an often overlooked stage in the blueprint process. This plan outlines the processes needed in the day-to-day operation of your inbound strategy. It assigns responsibility to departments or individuals tasked with completing each step. For example, if you're planning to create 50 new blog posts next quarter, you should identify the person or department responsible for quality assurance on those posts. Likewise, if you're hoping to publish 10 new infographics over the same time period, you'd better make sure your creative team has capacity to create that much new content. In all cases, your execution plan should clearly identify the person or department responsible for final approval prior to publication—you'll need a process for feedback and re-submission.

# HOW DO I GET STARTED?



Executing a successful inbound strategy can be quite an undertaking, even with all of the helpful information contained in this ebook. Higher ed marketers are busy professionals and inbound marketing isn't something that can be done "a little bit" or "occasionally." It's an overarching methodology that requires new ways of thinking about your customers and how to best attract, entice, and empower them. Often, inbound marketing requires additional resources and people with specialized skills, so it can be difficult to implement without help.

Olive & Company is passionate about helping colleges and universities achieve their mission and reach their objectives. For institutions striving to stand out from the competition and connect with prospective students, we offer transformative brand marketing solutions that drive results. Our unique approach fuses inbound marketing with brand strategy and web design.

Give us a call—let's work together to meet your enrollment goals.



**LET'S GET STARTED  
ON YOUR INBOUND  
MARKETING STRATEGY**

Contact us today for more information.



612 379.3090



**OLIVEANDCOMPANY  
.COM/CONTACT**