

The Enrollment Funnel

By Mark C. Perna

A smart marketing plan creates emotional attachment and loyalty in a school's prospective students.

Have you noticed the enormous competition targeted at your prospects and students? Turn on the TV or radio, or check your mailbox to see that every school, library, recreation center, and hundreds of companies are contending day after day for your prospects' and students' attention and loyalty. What are you doing to create and maintain an emotional attachment to your prospects and students? Building positive emotions is a critical part of the "smart marketing" process and should be addressed to achieve your enrollment goals.

In previous articles of *Techniques*, I have discussed the power of "smart marketing" by developing a brand plan, bold-whistle image, target-rich environment, consistent persistence and the Wade Factor in the worthwhile pursuit of becoming enrollment rich. Building on these marketing principles, the next key principle to "smart marketing" is the enrollment funnel. The enrollment funnel is the process of creating emotional attachment and loyalty by delivering a positive emotional experience in everything you do throughout your marketing plan.

In your standard marketing efforts, it is likely you pump out a lot of information about program features and benefits, which are routine "bread-and-butter" marketing tactics. Have you taken a look at how much (or how little) you use emotional appeals to help prospective students enroll? Buying decisions are, in fact, *emotional* responses to something we want or desire. Once prospects have an emotional response to what they want to have or experience, they begin the process of due diligence using logic to confirm that the emotional decision they make is the right one.

Students, like consumers, have different emotional needs—such as love, power, safety and belonging—that drive

their search for most products and services. You should address those buying motives in every event and marketing message you deliver. Keep in mind that people will remember 33 percent of what they read, 50 percent of what they are told, and 100 percent of what they feel! The lesson? Be careful how you make people feel—it will be remembered. The good news? Appreciating that lesson empowers us to create a positive environment for emotional attachment and loyalty.

"Great, Mark," you may ask, "so how do you blueprint all of that?"

The answer is a step-by-step approach that I created and call the enrollment funnel, which I will expand on through a series of articles in the coming months. The enrollment funnel is a systematic method of moving *prospective* students to becoming *actual* students as a result of generating positive feelings and emotional attachment that tie directly to your marketing plan. It can be accomplished on a broad, schoolwide basis or selectively for an individual program.

Building Your Funnel

To build positive emotional attachment, you need to make prospects feel important, to let them know they matter, and to have frequent contact and connection with them. The enrollment funnel is an ideal tool to achieve emotional attachment and turn prospective students into actual students.

The enrollment funnel is like any funnel, wide at the top and narrow at the bottom. The overall dimensions are dependent on the size of the opening needed at the bottom to drop through the desired number of students into your programs. The number of students you need to achieve your goals is directly related to the scale of your funnel. A substantial, well-built funnel with many steps allows for a steady stream of

students, while a smaller funnel with limited steps lessens the emotional connection and thereby limits the stream of students into your school.

Simply put, the enrollment funnel is a series of steps that all prospects go through. Every step builds upon the last and is an opportunity to create positive emotional attachment while guiding prospects to look favorably on the next step. Here is how it works.

Prospects drop into the top of the funnel the moment they become known to you. For most career and technical education high school marketing efforts, prospects become known in seventh or eighth grade. All open houses, tours, presentations and marketing messages advance prospects down the funnel. This continues until a sufficient amount of positive emotions have been created to have a new enrollee drop out of the funnel into one of your programs.

These action steps must work in harmony with your stated goals. The high school funnel, for example, includes steps for both students and parents in a cohesive plan that builds loyalty and breaks down stigmas associated with career and technical education.

As an illustration, I am currently working with a career tech high school in the development of a comprehensive enrollment funnel that adds action steps to their recruitment efforts. They do a good job of creating events and marketing materials, but the power is in the additional steps that we have identified to increase the positive feelings resulting from each experience.

Steps for Success

The funnel starts with a visit by every eighth grade class from feeder districts within the community. We clearly identified the current action steps within the event, including how the students arrive, tour and depart the function. After an extensive review, we added many specific enrollment funnel action steps to create a significant emotional event for each participant. Here are just a few examples of the many action steps we added:

- **Acquisition of Eighth Grade**

Student List. Obtain a database or list of all eighth graders to create a funnel database of students. This is the foundation to building a friendly atmosphere and personalizing all future action steps in the funnel.

- **Customized Permission Slip to Parents.** Parents are a key influencer. Instead of the middle school sending home the “standard” permission slip, your school creates and supplies the permission slip, which goes home to every eighth grader’s parent in your community. This is a terrific opening to use the

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“rain effect” to “drip” just a few concise benefits of your school to parents. Keeping parents informed throughout the funnel lessens the likelihood that they accidentally dampen your new students’ enthusiasm further down at a critical decision point.

- **Personalized Name Badge and Survey.** The prospects’ preprinted names are on the front, helping them feel welcome, important and connected when they are personally addressed throughout the tour. On the back is a short exit survey that captures what they felt that day prior to leaving. I call this taking their “temperature.” At many positions throughout your funnel, create checkpoints that will provide priceless feedback about your funnel and how prospects move through it. I will discuss this thoroughly in future articles.
- **Trained Student “Ambassadors” Lead the Event.** Successful and respected students from your school

are trained to present key scripted school benefits and feelings throughout the event. The goal is to develop a positive feeling about the school and the experience, which opens the prospect’s mind to future funnel steps to come.

- **Personalized Thank-You Letter Home to Parents.** Eighth graders take home a personalized letter to their parents thanking them for their child’s participation and “dripping” several short key benefits. The letter includes a bounce-back reply card offer for the parents to stay engaged by requesting ongoing communication about how students just like theirs have benefited.

Thinking Big

These steps and many others can be easily implemented in your own enrollment funnel, but I challenge you to think bigger. The big picture is in the formation of a funnel that does not finish with enrollment but continues beyond graduation. Develop as part of your funnel the retention strategies needed to keep students engaged year after year and the strategies that keep students connected until their own children are ready for the benefits of career and technical education. This is the long-term view of creating “students for life” and impacting the community in a positive way that changes paradigms, breaks down barriers and makes a difference.

Step by step, the enrollment funnel is a formidable ally in the struggle for the hearts and minds of your students and your community. To win the war of competition, you must develop, calibrate and fill your funnel effectively with significant emotional action steps and marketing messages that create a positive feeling and lead to loyalty. The enrollment funnel is one of many crucial strategies within “smart marketing” that support your journey along the road to being enrollment rich. ■

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