



THE MARKETER'S
GUIDE TO
**Higher
Education
Recruiting**
in a post-pandemic world

THE PLAIN DEALER
© cleveland.com





CONTENTS

STUDENT RECRUITMENT IN A POST-PANDEMIC ERA

3–5

SOCIAL MEDIA

6–9

ENGAGEMENT, A CRITICAL MARKETING STEP

10–13

ENROLLMENT IS AT A CROSSROADS

14–16

CHOOSE TRACKABLE AD PLACEMENTS

17–19

STUDENT RECRUITMENT IN A POST-PANDEMIC ERA

College opens doors. It provides the knowledge and skills for a person to perform in a future career and molds an individual by experiencing new activities, new ideas and new challenges. Last year students could not partake in most non-academic college experiences because the pandemic forced them into an online learning environment. Learning remotely did not allow students to fully appreciate or reap the benefits of campus life.

POST-PANDEMIC PLANS INDICATE A TAP THE BRAKES APPROACH

Though 90% of students are still planning on attending a four-year institution eventually, 58% are waiting to enroll in college after campuses reopen. “Students seem to want to stay closer to home and higher education leadership has looked to tighten the scopes of their campaigns. The emphasis on enrollment has remained a priority through all the challenges presented by COVID-19,” said Chris Torok, Advance Ohio digital executive. How do these institutions mitigate lags in enrollment?

THE ANSWER LIES IN A TWO-PRONGED VALUE APPROACH:

- More creativity is required in purposeful student outreach
- Retaining current students will be increasingly important



NEW STUDENTS

The main pillars to enhancing new student enrollment is to build awareness and preference, increase the volume of qualified student candidates, as well as enriching the image of the learning institution. So, imagine how challenging it is now for these institutions to provide value to their prospective students with the new realities brought on by COVID-19 and the consistent rise in tuition costs. How can a college/

university overcome these obstacles? Communication, communication, and communication! It sounds simple, but it can be quite complex. The thought is not to simply create a plan of ongoing communication but being very prescriptive on what messaging is being used, and when it is being used for each targeted audience.



GET CREATIVE WITH COMMUNICATION

Some compelling forms of outreach have proven to work in the midst of COVID-19 and will continue to work going forward include:



SOCIAL MEDIA

Customize content to the audience and platform. Utilize video, infographics, podcasts, webinars, other



PROMINENT SPEAKERS

Address students and faculty, as well as the general community on topics that highlight the college/universities facilities, programs, partnerships. Assume that everyone is an influencer



PEER-TO-PEER DIGITAL COMMUNICATION

Prospects can have their most specific questions answered by those that look just like them and speak their language



SPECIAL EVENTS (VIRTUAL OR IN-PERSON)

Spotlight students and faculty, showcase alumni, reinforce core competencies and announce new programs



VIRTUAL RECRUITMENT EVENTS

Allow admission directors to connect in ways that they have not in the past

CURRENT STUDENTS

The job is not done once a student is accepted and actually enrolls in classes. Most businesses today are concerned with the customer experience and the same thing should apply to the student experience. Therefore, to ensure students will continue their education with a particular college/university, that institution needs to better understand what the student body is encountering. Said another way, which individual students or group of students needs additional tutoring, which would appreciate proactive outreach from advisors, which would like to participate in student clubs/organizations, etc. So many colleges and universities collect immense amounts of data from targeted prospects as well as from enrolled students, but it never gets used. When used properly, the data can be used to better understand the students and implement focused outreach as well as retention strategies.

Time will only tell what truly holds for the higher education institutions! By leveraging a mix of personalized content, schools can generate online awareness, showcase student accomplishments, campus lifestyle, campus events, faculty, as well as explain how they have adapted since the onset of COVID-19. To reduce the potential for any enrollment decline, each college/university should be utilizing every resource possible to create an approach that promotes growth and success of their students, that is where the true value is!

Contributed By Gary Smeal, Digital Marketing Specialist

SOURCES:

<https://unibuddy.com/blog/6287/the-post-covid-future-of-student-recruitment/>
<https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/International/news/Pages/Post-pandemic-international-student-recruitment-trends.aspx>
<https://firstgen.naspa.org/blog/reinventing-student-success-in-a-post-pandemic-world>
<https://edtechmagazine.com/higher/article/2020/09/what-will-post-pandemic-college-enrollment-look>
<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/post-pandemic-future-higher-ed-jeff-selingo/>
<https://www.odwyerpr.com/story/public/15841/2021-03-16/staying-ahead-education-curve.html>





SOCIAL MEDIA

When attracting and converting students for higher education institutions is your goal, social media advertising is a natural choice. Not only do the social media platforms fit into the students every day online journey, but they also present cost effective ways of moving students through the funnel from discovery to enrollment.

Within the world of social media, there are many different platforms to choose from. We've found the different platforms can be helpful at different stages of the journey and with different students.

- **Gain actionable insights for your marketing team**
- **Better understand strategies used by agencies to gain an edge**
- **Make better decisions about traditional and digital**
- **Make your social media plan smarter**
- **Create a post enrollment strategy for retention**

Facebook

- **TOTAL US: 223M**
- **AGES 16-24: 53M**

As the biggest social media platform in the world – over 223 million users in the U.S. alone – Facebook presents a big opportunity for advertisers. Despite its roots as an .edu-only environment, Facebook has grown tremendously among every generation. This expansion to an older audience sometimes raises advertisers' concern about whether teens use the platform. The reality is that teens are not abandoning Facebook, but they are using it in conjunction with other platforms. Conversion and click-through rates with these students are still very strong, but are typically higher when paired with other platforms that give further context.

Instagram

- TOTAL US: 112M
- AGES 16-24: 25M

Instagram is one of our most popular and effective platforms for teens. The format is the best for discovery when compared to other social platforms, and it has the benefits of Facebook ownership along with a robust 112 million monthly users in the U.S. With this platform, compared to Facebook, the creative becomes increasingly important, as do different placements. Utilizing reels, videos, stories and eye-catching photography and graphics make a big difference in terms of engagement rate, which will bring you new users and further engage those already part of your ecosystem. It is important to be active and creative on Instagram in a paid capacity as well as organically. Every post in your social media channels should focus on student recruitment, even when done subtly.

LinkedIn

- TOTAL US: 117M
- AGES 16-24: 19M

LinkedIn presents a great opportunity for graduate enrollment and continued education. With its specific targeting related to companies, industries, job titles and degrees, LinkedIn means you are talking specifically to those looking to advance their careers in a more professional platform. From a user behavior standpoint, there is less time spent on LinkedIn compared to many other platforms, which can result in limited inventory and increased costs. That said, the customized placements and relevance of targeting make LinkedIn a valuable tool for many higher education institutions.

Snapchat

- TOTAL US: 46M
- AGES 16-24: 23M

A relative newcomer to the social media advertising world is Snapchat. With 46 million users in the U.S., it does not have the reach that Facebook and Instagram do, but it does have a high percentage of teenage and 20-something users. This audience is a prime opportunity for conversion. Creative is incredibly important on this video-first platform, as is speed of message. With a population trained to skip ads quickly with the touch of the screen, it's important to get the users' attention within the first second and provide very clear branding and messaging. As a result, Snapchat traditionally serves best as a branding strategy, supporting lifestyle and branding messaging and building the frequency users see your ads.

TikTok

- TOTAL US: 66M
- AGES 16-24: 23M

TikTok has been a cultural movement, generating headlines, pop culture trends and even launching careers of influencers. Like many social media platforms, its adoption was driven mostly by teens, making it an ideal platform to reach potential students. As with Snapchat, video is king on this platform, but TikTok ads take it a step further by embracing the influencer and organic marketing trends. The most successful TikTok ads feel organic to the platform and generally jump on trends utilizing the hashtags and sounds that are trending on the platform organically. The video format and influencer feel give higher education the chance to connect with students by giving potential students the opportunity to peek into the life of a student. While TikTok's advertising platform is getting better and more accessible to smaller advertisers, it can still be difficult to scale for efficiency and incredibly competitive due to a relative lack of inventory. In the meantime, however, it also serves as an ideal organic platform to drive student engagement.

HOW TO USE HASHTAGS

Proper hashtag use can be a frustrating question for many because it differs dramatically from platform to platform. So, what is the right answer?

Facebook:

The short answer is that Facebook is not set up to be a hashtag friendly environment. While they do work as a sortable tool, their primary use to present new, discoverable content does not fit in Facebook's user experience. As a result, hashtags are not as important or impactful on this platform. Exceptions to this rule are brands with a unified hashtag, which is best used when integrated into the ad copy as opposed to listed at the end.

Instagram:

Instagram is set up perfectly for hashtags and their use is incredibly important in growing a following and increasing engagement. In fact, a post with at least one Instagram hashtag averages over 12% more engagement than those without. Because hashtags are meant to allow users to discover content relevant to them and their interests, using a hashtag means the opportunity to grow your audience with every post. Developing a hashtag strategy that includes trending hashtags across the platform as well as custom hashtags you've developed for your institution work together to find success. You can use up to 30 hashtags on an Instagram post, giving you many options.

LinkedIn:

Like the platform in general, LinkedIn hashtags are more niche. Limit your hashtag use on this platform to the types of content those are searching for such as industry trends and terminology.

Snapchat:

Currently, Snapchat does not utilize hashtags.

TikTok:

TikTok can likely be considered the hashtag king at the moment. With the nature of the user experience on the platform, discovery is critically important and hashtags are the way to do that. Hashtags drive the content seen by the viewers and drive the trends of the content that creators are making on the platform. Each trend on the platform (for example, #FliptheSwitch or #IceBucketChallenge), gets its own hashtag and this is where the opportunity presents itself for brands to jump on the trend themselves. You can use up to 33 hashtags on TikTok and, because the video content is king and captions are secondary, feel free to use as many as you like. The sounds on TikTok, like Instagram Reels, are searchable as well, so choosing your sounds carefully and utilizing trending sounds are another way to harness the organic engagement of the platform.





GET CREATIVE

Keeping with the spirit of social media advertising, creative plays an important part on all platforms. With platforms like Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn, running a mix of creative (images, carousels, videos, etc.) allows the platform to serve the people most likely to engage with it. Snapchat and TikTok are primarily video-first platforms that serve a more limited scope of placements, primarily vertical mobile videos. The common theme across all platforms, however, is the spirit of the creative. Images or videos showing people generally perform the strongest. Aspirational, lifestyle focused creative also increases ad engagement.

THE TAKEAWAY

Social media advertising presents an incredible opportunity for higher education institutions to engage with potential students in places they already spend their time. Organic efforts and paid strategies go hand in hand to create holistic strategies that move students through the different stages of the funnel. A proper mix of different platforms also ensures coverage for the complex goals of higher education.

Contributed by Anne Cook, Social Media Strategist



ENGAGEMENT, A CRITICAL MARKETING STEP

When advising institutions of higher learning, we find that there are two key strategy areas that most often ignored. Interestingly, these two areas require similar tactics. Both require a keen eye on interaction between the University and its audience. Both are served by the widely praised and often poorly executed content and engagement strategy. Both serve to strengthen the sentiment of the institutional brand in a person-to-person way.

MOVING FROM AWARENESS TO CONVERSION PHASES

In our firm's experience, the biggest gap in university strategy exists when the engagement phase of recruitment is skipped. Most institutions value a robust traditional media strategy. Direct mail, Out of Home (Billboards, other outdoor), TV or radio are all broadly utilized traditional media selections, and all of them fit in the Awareness stage of the decision journey. One cannot click to call from a television ad or phone an advisor after seeing a billboard. These tactics are broad awareness efforts. Direct Mail, phone canvassing, high school visits/fairs and high-pressure measures to gain RFI's or campus visits move immediately to the conversion stage. The Engagement Phase, filled with 'get to know us' efforts, is broadly ignored. This blind spot in the decision journey is extremely influential.

REMAINING IN TOUCH POST ENROLLMENT

In this material, we'll dive more deeply into the second of these concerns, the post-enrollment activity. Also filled with engagement and more personalized interactions, the post-enrollment experience will make the difference between a University among the recruit's "top three" and where that student will appear on day one. Melt is a painful reality for many recruitment teams, often representing the difference between aspirational models for the future and harsher budget realities.



APPLICATION RECEIVED

Your team celebrates! You have a new prospect in the fold. Now you wait for the next step. Communications center largely on what to do next—dry, step by step instructions are sent, that cover the bases.



FINGERS CROSSED!

What Percentage of these students will actually attend classes? The team lays in wait to see what percentages can be reported, and how successful recruitment will be.



ENROLLMENT

Students have successfully been recruited. Your team celebrates!



WEEK ONE

Students Are Numbered and Enrollees become a Head Count, that becomes a sense of actualized revenue. Enrollment yield is configured. When we celebrate prematurely, we often ignore the most important stage: ensuring intent of our new recruits.

When we celebrate prematurely, we often ignore the most important stage: ensuring intent of our new recruits.

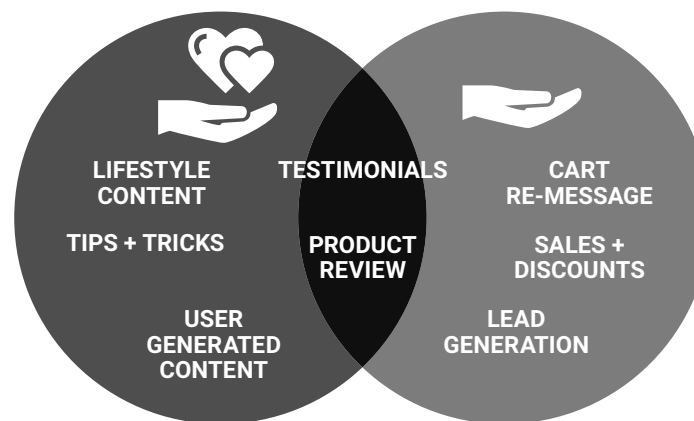
EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION POST- ENROLLMENT

You have connected with these students. They have committed to taking a step that brings them closer to joining your alumni prospects (on day one of classes). At this stage, forging a personal, lasting connection is more important than ever. Consider these personalization stats: 63% of consumers are highly annoyed with generic advertising blasts, and 80% say they are more likely to do business if it offers personalized experiences. Knowing that to be true for the purchase of a television or service, it's likely even more so with their choice of alma mater. Because you "know them" now, there's simply no excuse for making your interactions as personal as possible.

GIVE VERSUS ASK

Inevitably, your enrollment department will be connecting with prospective students with dry, how-to communications that drive their class selections, residential decisions, even parking and dining instructions. These are deeply impersonal, and rife with boredom, but extremely necessary for a successful transition to campus life. These are all examples of "ask" style communications. They are filled with checklists, calls to action, deadlines, and must-do's.

Give content doesn't benefit the University in any tangible way. Instead, it's meant to entertain, educate, or inspire the recipient. It makes the audience better, happier, or feel closer to you. This content must equal or outnumber the "ask" communications, or your relationship already feels transactional rather than emotional.



GIVE

Content that gives only benefits the consumer. It's meant to entertain or educate, making the consumer better or happier, while steering your brand narrative. Use your organic feed to GIVE to your audience. Boost your post to increase visibility.

GIVE + ASK

Drive revenue while providing a consumer benefit with this combined post type. It could appear organically or in paid media, depending on the tone and appeal of the content.

ASK

If it has a call-to-action, you are asking your consumer to do something in response to your post. Your ask content belongs in ads, and is targeted to your audience and those like them.

SAMPLE CONTENT FOR POST-ENROLLMENT COMMUNICATIONS



Map and Recommendations for Local Attractions and Restaurants within walking, biking, or busing distance of campus.



Pro-Tips from sophomores for first time freshman. (Doubles as a great hashtag campaign that crowd sources content from existing student body in the public view)



Affinity-based communications about cultural events, faith-based community, or other



Video Profiles of 5 Campus "must-know" items



Social Media Cards that feature unsung heroes on campus (RA's, TA's, Librarian, Food Service)



Podcast Series with Research Project Leads Across Campus



Sponsor Content in Local Media featuring University Life



Transparent Summaries of Pandemic Protocols



Where to Find Lists: Lunch under \$6; The best spot to study; a support group



Detailed stories on off-campus things, like Alternative Spring break and Philanthropic Groups

TAKE ACTION TO AVOID DEPRESSED YIELD

The post-enrollment experience will make the difference between a University among a recruit's "top three" and where that student will appear on day one. It's within your power to influence this decision with more "give" than "ask." Do this better than your competitors, and you've made the critical difference.

Other content you may find helpful is linked below. Your students aren't a "sure thing" at this stage. Remember that you are still wooing them! Consider how your strategy for connecting with these enrollees and what will make them feel even closer to your brand. (Gifts are never a bad idea, either.)

- [CONTENT MARKETING PILLARS](#)
- [CONTENT PUBLISHING FREQUENCY](#)
- [PODCASTING TIPS & TRICKS](#)

ENROLLMENT IS AT A CROSSROADS

According to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, Spring undergraduate **enrollment is down 5.9% year-over-year across the U.S.**; no doubt a direct impact of the pandemic. Even more concerning, recent Gallop poll results indicate nearly 50% of Americans deem a college education not as important as once considered.

As universities evolve to meet the needs of today's students and rebuild public perception regarding the value of a college education, the need to adapt marketing strategies has never been more crucial.



GETTING STARTED

Before launching an integrated marketing strategy, it's important to understand what success looks like. If you can't measure a campaign's performance, how can you manage and optimize for success? From search to social, digital display and video, understanding which tactics or mediums are driving results – or underperforming – starts with a campaign ad tagging strategy.



CLICK-THROUGH CONVERSION PIXEL TRACKING

When a user clicks and converts an intended action.



VIEW-THROUGH CONVERSION PIXEL TRACKING

User served an ad, doesn't click, but converts later.



CUSTOM CAMPAIGN URL

Details which campaigns and content are driving referrals and conversion.



REMARKETING PIXEL TRACKING

Build frequency with an engaged user who visited a website or engaged with creative.



SEARCH ENGINE MARKETING CALL TRACKING

Provides insights into PPC ad spend efficiency and lead conversion.

REVIEW BEHAVIORS – EXISTING AND DESIRED

Once tracking metrics are in place, attention turns to the behaviors prospective students and parents take along the decision path to enrollment. The average student applies to five to eight colleges throughout the process. That's hours of research on areas of study, campus culture, career projections, and beyond.



This interest phase is a slow burn, and the key to understanding success lies in website audience data. The following website analytic data points as the digital breadcrumbs worth monitoring:

- **New users**
- **Time on site**
- **Average pages per visit**
- **Session duration**
- **Top site content and pages visited**



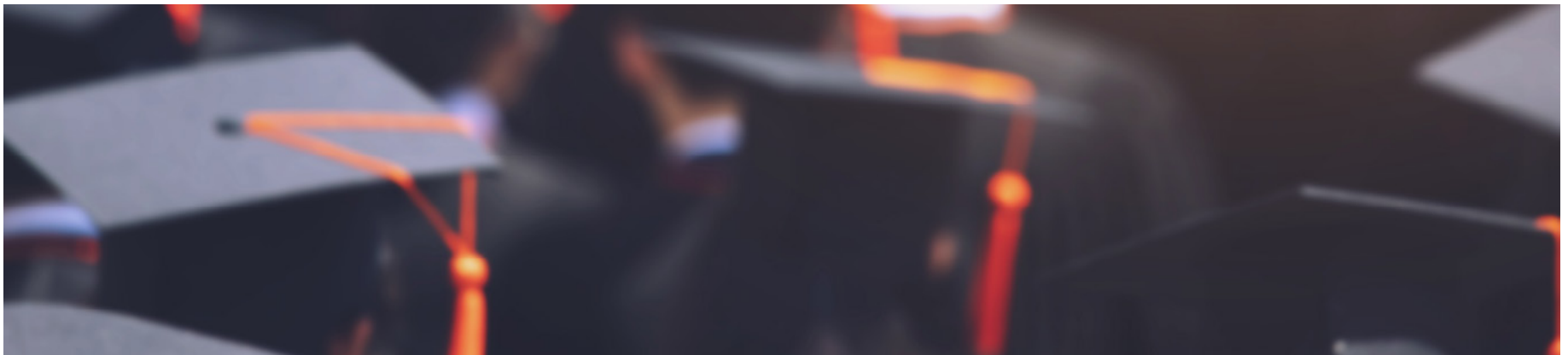
Institutions elevate from "safety school" to front runner by providing value along the way with impactful content intrigues and ignites actions of intent. The next meaningful event once value is established with a prospective student is an intentional inquiry to learn more, usually ending in an exchange of contact information. Consider the following lead generation inquiries:

- **Content offer call-to-action response**
- **Gated content request or download**
- **Email sign-up**



With the research done and curated content consumed, it's decision time. Facing the precipice of elimination, top schools rise earn the right to engage with prospective students on a personal level. For that, these bottom funnel actions are the final qualifiers that tell the story of campaigns impact on enrollment:

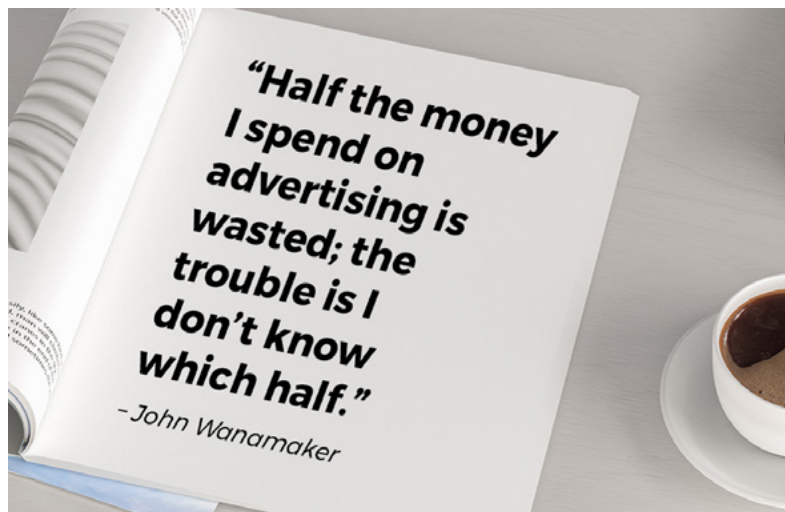
- **Event or visit registration**
- **Contact form submission**
- **Click to call**
- **Chat submission**



REVIEW YOUR METRICS

Monthly campaign delivery is mission critical to an efficient and effective marketing strategy. There are ebbs and flows to any campaign as consumer habits change, and interest and attention shift one medium to the next. Measuring these suggested actions and behavioral benchmarks will shed light on what's having the greatest impact on enrollment and the ROI of any campaign.

Without setting goals and expectations before a campaign implementation is a recipe for disaster. John Wanamaker, a pioneer of advertising once wrote:



Thanks to the data-driven transparency of digital marketing, wasted investment for higher education marketers is a thing of the past.

Contributed by Jeff Hutchings, Digital Marketing Strategist

Sources:

<https://nscresearchcenter.org/stay-informed/>

<https://www.cnbc.com/2019/12/19/only-51percent-of-americans-see-college-as-important-despite-benefits.html>



CHOOSE TRACKABLE AD PLACEMENTS

All marketers obsess over “being there” for their audience. Whether it’s share at the store shelf or share of voice on TV, a variety of metrics are used to judge how present a brand actually is. In higher education marketing, this couldn’t be more true.

- **We strive to reach and influence youth before they are faced with decisions about an educational institution.**
- **We hope to create richer connections with the institution for graduates, imparting on them that they are “forever friends”**
- **We engage those in the decision making process with content, video, direct mail, and more.**

But often institutions of higher learning over-emphasize the power of what’s worked in the past and dedicate a disproportionate budget to traditional media.

*TRADITIONAL MEDIA: BROAD
STROKE MARKETING METHODS
SUCH AS BILLBOARDS AND
BROADCAST*



YOUR AUDIENCE IS ON A SMART DEVICE

Mobile devices overtook desktop and laptop in 2013. In fact, 60% of the time we are online, it's on a mobile device. If your digital presence isn't optimized for a smartphone, you're not only behind, you're depleting your connections. 84% of the population has a second device in hand while they are watching television. 65% check their phones within 15 minutes of rising each morning, and 87% have smartphones on their person 100% of the time. 75% of Facebook users are mobile-only. If you aren't competing for attention in the digital space or have a mobile strategy, you should be.



87%

**HAVE SMARTPHONES
ON THEIR PERSON
100% OF THE TIME**

TRACKING MAKES THE DIFFERENCE

Aiming to reach the broadest available audience at once is a worthy goal. This is an “awareness” play that we all know well—using the broadest reach and the largest geographic audience possible, in hopes to move the needle quickly.

Digital advertising offers something that television, billboards and radio never could: trackable interactions. Proof that your placements are working, and the ability to understand who your true audience is and adjust to their preferences quickly.

As you are beginning to navigate the digital space, let's talk about delivery choices.



PROGRAMMATIC

You may be hoping to “replace” the television experience with video ads and would like a similar audience. If so, programmatic buying is likely your plan. Buying programmatically means that you select the impression count you can afford, and attach audience attributes as needed, sending your ads to a broad spectrum of sites and placements over a period of time. You’ll name the impression count, audience type and reach, and the digital network will serve your ads in adherence with the “rules” you’ve generated.

DIRECT BUY

Are you looking for an audience that is consuming specific kinds of content, like entertainment, news, or sports? Get more granular with a direct buy. Going to a trusted site provides a brand-safe platform where your message appears among content categorically. You can choose types of content to live alongside, like sports, for instance. All or some of the sports articles on the site would then contain advertisements for your business. This works for most websites, as buying direct is an easy way to get exactly what you want, rather than leave it to the hands of technology alone.



TRACKING

Either way, the activity with your ads is more trackable than television or radio. You know just how many times your ad appeared and in front of how many individuals. You can dictate the type of person to whom the ad is served and watch as clicks and site traffic increases. Pair this activity with paid search, and you’ll find that attention increases even more.

Whatever your budgeting plan, know that you’ll be among more advertisers than ever before, and your ability to know your audience, understand and track their interactions will be increasingly important.





WE'RE HERE TO HELP

We thrive on partnership. On invention.
On solving marketing riddles.

THE PLAIN DEALER
© cleveland.com



www.Advance-Ohio.com
www.MLiveMediaGroup.com