

Low-Cost Marketing Tactics to Boost Enrollment

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It's a well-known fact that enrollment at community colleges has a lot to do with the economy. When the economy is down, enrollment goes up as workers seek retraining. When the economy is up, enrollment goes down as people leave school to go back to work.

Since 2011, in a post-recession economy, enrollment at America's community colleges [has decreased](#) an average of 3.5 percent a year.

College marketing and communication professionals can help turn the tide, even in a resource-scarce environment. Here are five tactics — some new, some tried-and-true — that require a minimal financial investment.

Target Audiences with Geofencing

This form of mobile advertising draws a “virtual boundary” around a specific geographic location and sends pop-up ads to individuals' mobile phones when they enter that defined space. The benefits are huge.

A geofencing campaign can be implemented on short notice; it's very targeted, inexpensive and results-driven; and there are companies that can do all the work based on any size budget.

[Central Community College](#) (CCC) in Nebraska recently conducted such a campaign to recruit students to a new associate degree program in environmental health and safety. With little advance notice and a budget of only \$350, the college worked with a mobile advertising company on a campaign targeted at individuals working in local manufacturing plants. The idea was to entice people on the front lines to consider moving into higher-level positions as health and safety technicians, says Amanda Groff, advertising director at CCC.

The campaign ran for three weeks in December 2015 for classes starting in January 2016. The results were impressive. The mobile ads were viewed more than 100,000 times; 453 individuals clicked through to the program's landing page; and the college recorded increases in phone calls and website hits specific to the new degree program. Enrollment in classes, though not at capacity, was enough to get the program off to a good start, Groff says.

Find 'Hidden' Prospects

Don't overlook hidden audiences that should be part of your enrollment pipeline. These include applicants who are no-shows at registration, prospects who list your college on their FAFSA, high school students who ask that your college receive their ACT or SAT

test scores, dual-enrollment students and stop-outs who didn't return from one semester to the next. All of these are "captive" audiences — with contact information — and if they don't show up at registration time, you should be following up with them.

Remember the Power of Personal Touch

In a world dominated by impersonal communication via emails, texts and tweets, [Central Oregon Community College](#) (COCC) still sends handwritten thank-you notes to campus visitors. Tour guides choose each word carefully. It costs more and takes more time, but the return is worth it.

NCMPR members can [log in](#) for a library of marketing and PR resources. "We hear time and again from our visitors how surprised they were to receive a personalized thank you in their mailbox," says Drew Jones, assistant director of admissions at COCC. "In many cases, we've been told this simple gesture was the deciding factor for prospective students to attend COCC over other colleges."

Don't Forget Word of Mouth

In her advertising class at [Oakland Community College](#) in Michigan, Michele Kersten-Hart, manager of multimedia and web services, reminds students that word of mouth marketing is still the best form of advertising. This means it's imperative to know what students and community members are saying about you, and their perceptions should be part of your messaging.

It's equally important to share key messages with faculty and staff and ask them to put customer service first.

"Today's consumers can block, fast forward and skip most of our advertising efforts," Kersten-Hart says. "This makes word of mouth marketing and excellent customer service more important than ever before."

And Don't Forget About Retention

Keeping students until they achieve their goals is another way to keep enrollment on an even keel. Retention is a whole other topic, but a tactic with a twist recently initiated at [Portland Community College](#) (Oregon) is a letter of support to students — from the college president. Among other things, the letter congratulates students for choosing to come to school, particularly amid life's other challenges like work, kids and finances. It's also filled with words of encouragement and a very personal message: "We're proud of you!"

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