

# Salesmanship in college recruiting

BY TOM ROBINSON

Forget about the image of the snakeoil hawker... real salesmanship can bring in the cream of the crop.



**M**arketing, branding and sales can all be controversial terms when spoken around some campus administrators or faculty members. But take a closer look. Sound selling strategies have earned an honorable place on campus.

In fact, the practitioners featured here demonstrate that sound salesmanship does not besmirch the hallowed image of academe. Sound salesmanship can make a college look better to quality prospects and help balance the budget as well.

The sharp salespeople interviewed here share expertise that can add significant firepower to your marketing and recruitment efforts.

They have different perspectives, and they share some common strategies. Know your prospect well. Pay close attention to where he or she is in the process. Establish a relationship. Focus on what's important to him or her.

And use the tools of segmentation, sales sequencing, CRM and pricing to help you meet your campus enrollment objectives.

## Segmentation

Zeroing in on the prospective first-time freshman target audience has been pretty simple. First-time-in-college (FTIC) prospects are neatly arranged in the nation's high schools and prep schools. However, FTICs are now a shrinking minority of today's college student population. The larger prospect pool includes transfers, grad students and adult learners. Smart marketers know that the larger prospect pool can be segmented by characteristics like first-generation, international, average students, brainiacs, athletes, locals, the needy, employer-paid, and so on.

Many old-line marketers still believe that if you put enough prospects into the top of a selling funnel, they will likely make their numbers at the bottom. That inefficient model wastes resources generating voluminous leads of dubious quality. It also prevents the application of targeted, productive interaction that increases the likelihood



## COLUMBIA COLLEGE CHICAGO

### Murphy Monroe

*Executive Director of Admissions*

**EXPERTISE:** Murphy D. Monroe brings experience from the for-profit Apollo Group and a mastery of metrics to his job

### In your opinion what common goal do all admissions and enrollment management people share?

**MONROE:** The common goal is to help every college-bound student find the best fit. In an ideal world that would require a fair, honest, unvarnished view of our college. If an admissions officer is doing a good job finding those who are going to thrive at his or her institution, retention will be improved.

### What did you learn while working for Apollo Group that proves useful at Columbia College?

**MONROE:** I learned how to prudently manage a marketing budget; how to build one-on-one relationships with prospects; to be available on their terms and use the technologies they use. More importantly, I have come to realize that traditional sales and closing tactics don't work over the long run. Honesty and transparency are not only ethical, they are a stronger force in today's market.

### What other schools are Columbia's admissions prospects considering?

**MONROE:** Locally, we cross with DePaul, the University of Illinois Chicago, Roosevelt and Northwestern. Nationally, we see lots of cross application with Emerson, NYU and other film and art schools like USC, UCLA, Cal Arts and SCAD.

### What recruitment data do you have now, and how do you use it?

**MONROE:** A partnership between Hobsons and our IT office developed an admissions database that not only has demographics, but also every one of the transactions every prospect has had with our office—when they call, how many e-mails, how long it takes to complete an app. From the data we have, we can build a predictive model of those most likely to apply. Among them we can identify the ones most likely to be successful. Then we can intelligently apply our recruitment muscle.

### What recent successes can you attribute to your admissions metrics?

**MONROE:** In a few years Columbia has transformed from a mostly commuter campus with 350 beds to a national residential college with 2,500 beds and students from all 50 states and 45 countries.

### How do you help arts & media students follow their dreams while remaining realistic about their employment options?

**MONROE:** We keep them centered and we remind them how tough and competitive the arts field can be. It's a field of endeavor that is a calling, rather than a choice. We never promise jobs or fame. What we do promise is a world-class



## EDUCATIONAL DIRECTORIES UNLIMITED

### Mark Shay

President

**EXPERTISE:** Mark Shay and his company operate GradSchools.com, StudyAbroad.com, StudentProspector and UCEAdirectory.org.

#### Are freshman-bound undergraduates using the web to discover schools or to validate them?

**SHAY:** There's always debate whether students discover you on the web or elsewhere. Regardless, web strategy should accommodate who the visitors are and how they are using the site. An incoming freshman will visit a school site 35 times, on average, between discovery and the first day of class. He or she will involve friends, parents and counselors in the process.

#### How might an undergraduate school's web site accommodate this shopping reality?

**SHAY:** Like other shopping situations, the undergraduate prospect has taken control of the shopping process. Find out if he or she is a serious customer by surveying, collecting data and storing cookies. Be very attentive to where he is now and what he'll want next. If he asks a question about the application, take that very seriously. It's different from a general inquiry about athletics.

#### How important is price in an undergraduate school's selling strategy?

**SHAY:** Price is not very important at all. Anecdotal evidence suggests the more expensive a college, the better it is. Low price is never a decision maker. High price is not a deterrent. Price is not even a tie breaker. The student says 'it's my future' and the parent says 'that's my kid.'

#### What's driving people to graduate school today?

**SHAY:** A graduate degree is key to future success. Students are more discriminating. They want to learn from the best, and they want to pursue their passion with people who share their enthusiasm. One difference from a generation ago: the type of degree—biology or business—is less important than the level of degree—bachelor's or master's.

#### How do graduate school prospects use the web?

**SHAY:** The nuts and bolts of the degree or the academic program are more important than the college brand. Also important: what is the research environment? How are the facilities? Who is teaching? Do they publish? What are they known for? Faculty have a big influence.

#### How might graduate schools be guided by today's career realities?

**SHAY:** To enter certain professions, like law or medicine, you need a law or medical degree. For others there is considerable flexibility. People are now pursuing their personal interests. And employers can recognize leadership qualities in a prospect whose degree might be in social sciences or

of a successful close. Murphy Monroe worked with his IT department and Hobsons to create a predictive model of students who will not only apply, but more importantly, be successful after they enroll.

Successful salesmanship adapts selling messages—their tone, their timing and communications channels—to reflect prospects' experiences, perspectives and life-stages, thus optimizing impact. David Mammano knows well to start by alleviating the fears harbored by young students. As Peggy Conlon points out, there are language and cultural considerations for Hispanic and first-generation students who do not know how to navigate the process. Michael Cooney stresses that first-generation students respond well to a very structured path to a career. Carol Aslanian advises that for adult prospects the key benefits of location, convenience and service should be emphasized.

#### Sales sequencing

Sales often take place in sequential patterns. The AIDA model comes to mind: awareness > interest > desire > action. Advertising, publicity or word-of-mouth builds awareness. An interested prospect will gather more information or take a test drive. If it appeals, desire begins to build. At some tipping point, the prospect acts on the desire and buys.

Direct marketers use decision trees to track and respond to a prospects' behavior. If a prospect requested information, but did not buy, he gets offer A. If he purchased in the past, he gets offer B. Knowing where a prospect is in the process is essential to selling. A prospect "in discovery," should receive generalized information to help make a short list. A prospect who is visiting the website for the tenth or twentieth time should be contacted with more personalization—and more often.

Mark Shay believes that sales sequencing can also direct the sales force. Rather than loading up the trunk with boxes of view books and driving 200 miles to a college fair for 100 high-schoolers who are just browsing, consider redeploying that sales force to manage e-mails and phone inquiries from serious prospects. Instead of

banker's hours, try an evening shift when prospects are online. Instead of sending the whole glossy college information package, parse it out in sequence with a prospect's progress.

### Customer relationship marketing

The slick suede-shoe salesman stereotype is famous for tricking gullible customers into a one-time sale. Today's college marketers realize that wasting time on a mismatched prospect who doesn't apply or leaves after a semester also wastes money. On the other hand, selectively recruiting a good match can well make that person a lifetime customer. The break-even point for the four-year-college recruiting cost is often one to two years. Each year he or she stays enrolled after that, the "profit margin" improves. A successful student who is a prime candidate for graduate school will generate two or four more years of tuition for some happy campus without a significant expense. And a successful graduate is a candidate for alumni/ae giving. CRM helps the relationship remain happy and fruitful for decades.

### Pricing

Despite all the grumpiness about the cost of college, Mammano and Shay both contend that parents and students continue to defy logic and make this major purchase almost irrationally. Since it's difficult to put a value on the educational experience of a particular college in advance, many people default to 'if it's expensive, it must be good.' Many colleges are in the enviable market position of not having to cut their prices to meet competition. Loans and rationed discounts buffer shocking sticker prices. Cooney believes that with such an elastic price-value relationship, good salesmanship will keep the emphasis on the value side of the equation and sell the college on its merits, not its price.

Monroe stresses that finding a student who is a good fit is the name of the game. All sales are not final. Unhappy customers stop registering for classes and go elsewhere. That's an expensive mistake for the buyer, and it is an expensive lesson for your campus as well. Perhaps salesmanship is not



### NEXT STEP PUBLISHING

#### David Mammano

CEO & Publisher

**EXPERTISE:** David Mammano is the CEO of Next Step Publishing with an audience of high school students and college transfer students.

#### Who are the readers of Next Step magazine and what are they looking for?

**MAMMANO:** Next Step is distributed to 900,000 juniors and seniors in 20,500 high schools. They are planning for college and want to alleviate anxiety by assessing themselves; matching careers, majors and colleges; and understanding financial aid options. We also help them explore careers. The writing style is cool enough for the kids, but clean enough for the high schools, and is often contributed by college students for a peer-to-peer perspective.

#### What do your reader surveys tell you about parent attitudes toward college prices?

**MAMMANO:** A poll revealed that more than 90 percent of parents expect their child will attend a four-year college, yet 52 percent have saved less than \$5,000. They are concerned that college costs are reeling out of control. Knowing that it's so expensive, many have given up trying to save. When they learn about financial aid, some of the fears are alleviated temporarily—until they realize the aid is a loan to be repaid. Nonetheless, 24.4 percent are willing to take a home equity loan; 22.7 percent a second job; 15.1 percent other loans.

#### Do parents apply the same price standards to college as to any other expensive purchase?

**MAMMANO:** College is a more emotional buy. Parents don't want to let their kid down. There may be a sense of entitlement; 'he got into Dartmouth, why shouldn't he go there?' They haven't given enough time to this issue. By the time they engage, they are in the fast-moving phase. Despite the cost, they will find a way. They expect more quality for a more expensive price. But as tuition continues increasing, many more parents will have to get over the Ivy League expectation.

#### How has Next Step bucked the trend that says young people don't read print magazines?

**MAMMANO:** Teens have never read newspapers, but magazines are different. Harvey Research tells us our average reader spends 45 minutes with us. Next Step is like a bridal magazine. You read it when focused on that one issue, and then never again. Students are reading on lots of platforms, so our magazine works in concert with our web site which has 150,000 unique visitors a month. Revenue and circulation are growing 20 percent a year.

#### What's next for Next Step?

**MAMMANO:** Software applications for high school guidance counselors with communications tools, e-mail support and scholarship data. Web-commercials or one-minute online college tours. Messages customized by



## CAREER EDUCATION REVIEW

### Michael Cooney

*Publisher*

**EXPERTISE:** Editor of *Career Education Review*, produces TV and print ads for career colleges, and serves as the chairman of the Wisconsin Educational Approval Board which licenses 147 schools.

#### What motivates a person to purchase an enrollment in a for-profit career college?

**COONEY:** Flexibility, convenience and location are key. They also like short-term programs that improve their family's financial security or lifestyle. As career colleges compete more with traditional higher education, their strength with many prospects is transferability of ideas and words directly to the job place. African-American mothers tell me often that they want their own pursuit of education to be an example for their kids.

#### What role does TV advertising play in that sale?

**COONEY:** TV has been a prime source of students for successful career colleges that have mastered the "change your life in 30-seconds" commercial technique. We know it works, because students often say 'the career looked interesting.' The response mechanism used to be a phone number on the screen or in the Yellow Pages. Now, at least 60 percent of the time, it's an internet address.

#### What role does the web play in that sale?

**COONEY:** All kinds of suppliers are selling leads that have been generated on the web. They are relatively cheap and plentiful, but difficult to convert. Many career colleges consistently report that prospects generated from the school's own site have much better conversion rates—and ultimately better ROI. Unfortunately, the web is the ultimate level playing field, and everybody is playing there. A college must demonstrate academic quality along with support services that their prospects need to succeed. When the student in the testimonial says 'If I can do it, you can do it, too,' does the prospect believe it?

#### What role does price play?

**COONEY:** The majority of career college students receive federal financial aid to help close the tuition gap. Even so, the successful career college has to establish its value from day one, with personal service that makes a jittery prospective student say 'Wow, this is really different than that big university.' I worry that career colleges are getting dangerously over-priced for some programs. There is a point where students doubt the job for which they are being prepared is worth the outlay.

#### What can be said about the cost of acquiring a career college student?

**COONEY:** The cost of acquisition has increased for everyone, period. It may go higher or lower depending on cyclical factors. High unemployment rates drive people to worker training. Public funds can increase enrollments.

**P. 67**  
**AD**



## THE ASLANIAN GROUP

### Carol Aslanian

*President*

**EXPERTISE:** Carol Aslanian and her firm specialize in adult learner market research and enrollment management.

#### What is common knowledge among higher education administrators about adult students?

**ASLANIAN:** Administrators at the 2,000 or so universities with graduate schools accept know that adult professionals constitute the majority of those programs. They also know that working professionals need schedule flexibility, convenience and good service. And they prefer classroom or blended instruction near home.

#### What are some common misconceptions about them?

**ASLANIAN:** Adults, in fact, make good students. They perform well. They're known to be 'curve busters,' and they graduate with high standards of performance. Many faculty have said adults bring 'reciprocity' back into the classroom. They enhance the educational process as avid learners with real experiences. They will even challenge... and in so doing, broaden the scope of the learning process. More than half use their own revenue to pay for their education. The remainder is often tuition reimbursement. Colleges who enroll them don't overuse their institutional scholarship or grant resources.

#### What does your most recent survey say about employers' tuition reimbursement plans?

**ASLANIAN:** Tuition reimbursement is alive and well. It is 'very important' to 30-40 percent of adult learners. Employers continue to support credit and non-credit education, but want it to be job-related. What has changed is that some employers are now utilizing lists of preferred college providers. College administrators: are you aware of your presence or absence on company lists?

#### What effects have for-profit schools had on not-for-profits?

**ASLANIAN:** The not-for-profits are becoming better marketers. In the online space, for-profit providers are leading the way for the not-for-profits to expand. Of 18 million students, about 2 million are enrolled in a for-profit program. Yet students today would prefer to attend a not-for-profit institution that has a history and reputation locally. A local college can capture a market with adequate marketing and online instruction delivered with convenience, location and career-oriented content.

#### Who are your firm's clients and how do you help them?

**ASLANIAN:** Our clients are two- and four-year institutions that want to increase their share of adult undergrad and grad students. We conduct in-depth market studies among recent adult learners, employers and 'lost customers'—those who didn't apply or enroll. We can assess recent demand among target audiences. We perform institutional audits to identify strengths and challenges, assess nearby competitors and make action recom-