

# Okay, Google: How Do We Get More Students?

## Webinar

FAQ Sheet from Webinar on April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2020

*Below are responses from the presenters.*

1. What type of budget do I need to accomplish my goals via Google? Each college is different and unique.

ReachLocal works with Interact to develop a custom budget for you. This is dependent on your goals and what programs/certifications/degrees you want to promote. Cost per click varies from city to city, the amount of competition varies, and search volume also varies. All of these affect your budget as well. Several factors come into consideration when providing a custom budget for your college.

2. How do I buy Google ads and optimize our SEO? Set up keywords? What resources are available so I can set this up for my college?

Google offers help through AdWords if you want to purchase direct keywords and run your own PPC campaign. Within AdWords, there are tutorials to help you set up and run your own campaigns, and they offer guidance on limited manual adjustments you can make as well.

3. Often, I think we have to turn campaigns on/off because of lack of budget. We can't afford to keep them going all year! How do we economize and keep an always-on presence?

It's worth taking a harder look at where your college is spending money and what things you're doing that you probably should let go. Chances are, you already know what some of these are. This could be the opportunity you've been waiting for to show why you should cut a practice and employ something you know will prove more beneficial. If you're still spending money on efforts that aren't bringing you measurable ROI, doing them because you've always been doing them, or doing them just because someone on your faculty or leadership team happens to like them, you could likely divert funds from those activities to ensure at least a minimum year-long digital media presence.

Ideally, you should keep your PPC campaign running year-round to capture students when they are searching, and to not lose optimization on a campaign. Each time you restart your campaign and you are "dark" for over a 30-day period, you lose optimization and your

quality score. This temporarily affects performance and the cost per click. You can budget so that you have a presence that might be minimal during certain times of the year, but you don't go "dark" completely.

4. What free resources or tools do you recommend for attracting new students?

There are lots of free resources out there, but, unfortunately, you do get what you pay for. In general, the things that truly help you engage with your students, like a CRM, are not free. You can use some of Google's free tools like *Google Sheets*, but you will spend a large amount of time maintaining those documents. It really comes down to spending money or spending time. For small offices, spending money on tools will save you time. If you are a larger office, you may have the staff bandwidth to maintain some of those tools.

Google does offer many free resources that can help you get insight when developing your marketing and recruiting plans. For example, with *Google Trends*, you can see what changes are taking place with search. [Here is a link](#) to the specific filter our Google expert used during the webinar presentation.

5. How does search work? What's the most effective way to leverage search to connect to potential students? How does search change throughout the customer journey (from researching to exploring and committing)?

When someone searches on Google, Yahoo, or Bing, a college can "bid" on the keywords that potential students are searching. By running a pay-per-click (PPC) campaign and bidding on these keywords, your text ad will show to a potential student searching during this time. If the student clicks on your text ad, they are directed to your website. It's important to have a large enough keyword list that you bid on to attract students throughout their journey. We typically recommend a mix of keywords that are general like "community college near me" or "community college online programs" to more specific keywords such as "online nursing program" to attract students looking for a specific program/degree/certificate or students who are just beginning to research.

6. How do I get students who are resistant to online classes to try and/or like online classes? Succeed in online classes? What about students who have limited internet access at home?

One recommendation is using social media, YouTube, and Google display ads to connect with these students. You can create positive messages that will resonate with students to encourage them to try online classes. You can record an interview with one of your college's professors and promote that video in social media platforms or with over-the-top (OTT) streaming to encourage students and make them feel more comfortable. There are

so many ways to get creative with your messaging and connect with students on Snapchat, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube.

Keep in mind that, generally speaking, first-generation students want the “college experience,” and that is not sitting alone in their bedroom and talking to their computer. Trying to convince that group that an online education is the same will require a great deal of effort and might still fail. Thinking about how you can you make online education feel like the college experience might be a better approach.

For those who have limited internet access, one idea is having folks use the college’s internet from their vehicles while in the parking lot. This ensures they are still social distancing, but gives them a resource that wasn’t as accessible to them as before.

7. How do students’ learning preferences change by age as far as their preferences for being in-seat or online?

Learning preferences depend on many different variables. While recently looking at a database of students, one thing that was observed was audience preferences as they relate to classroom and online experiences. In general, the database showed that older Caucasian adults appreciate online learning more than younger, diverse audiences. Other research has shown that younger students who have developed web “surfing” habits have difficulty focusing on online education. By being in an environment where students can be listening to a class and visiting websites at the same time, there are additional obstacles for making sure students are learning.

8. What are best practices for connecting with adult learners? How about with Gen Z?

You need to use a mix of tactics and be on a mix of different platforms to make sure you are connecting with the correct audiences. Typically, you can connect with both audiences through pay-per-click (PPC), Google display and over-the-top streaming (OTT), and YouTube. Generally, we recommend targeting Gen Z on platforms like Snapchat and Instagram. Adult learners tend to spend more time on Facebook. Interact and ReachLocal work to make sure your marketing plan is solid, with ads reaching the correct audiences on the right platforms.

9. How do we create successful videos? Any insight on length of videos, types of videos, ads vs. branded storytelling, and frequency? Anything specific for YouTube?

Typically, videos between 30 and 60 seconds hold the most engagement, but we also see success with shorter 15-second videos (and even longer-form videos on occasion). It depends on the platform, tactics used in that platform, and type of content. It’s best to run a variety because your audiences will respond differently.

For YouTube, many of our college partners will use a “pay per completed view” strategy. Keep in mind that there will be a “Skip” button on your video, so it’s important to show your brand right away and not have it get covered up by that button.

#### 10. What are best practices for emailing students?

One of the most important things to keep in mind is to use email to engage and encourage students. Too often, colleges only email students to give them instructions or deadlines, and have offices writing the emails that are not considering tone and desired action. If marketing is not involved in crafting the emails going out from key service areas of your college, offer to edit these and map out a just-in-time communication plan that provides students what they need to hear from you when they need to hear it and how they need to hear it, so they feel your support and persist from semester to semester and between semesters. Be proactive by building out your student email message campaigns for a full year, or at the very least for an entire semester, and tie them in with other communication channels (like your organic social media posts) to build consistency and repetition.

Web usability expert Jakob Nielsen tracked 1.5 million eye movements of 300 web users and found that the users don’t read everything. The study found users skip over content that appears unimportant, resulting in an F-shaped reading pattern. Relevant words and images on the left side of the screen tended to get more attention than things on the right. This means it is critical to lead with the most important and relevant content, start with keywords in subheads, use bolded words and type treatments on the far left to break up the content, have a call to action in large text in the middle of the page, and put details at the bottom of the email.

#### 11. What kind of admissions or recruitment activities can be conducted virtually?

You can do virtual tours, online open houses, host social media chats and live events, share student blogs and vlogs, etc. There are a lot of different options out there (and with the current situation, many tech companies are developing new tools to use as well).

#### 12. How does earned media come into play? Is earned media helping how we’re found on Google?

Earned media could help with search engine optimization (SEO), but you have to do an active SEO campaign in order for it to help your college be found on Google. For example, if your college’s story was covered in a local newspaper, the newspaper site is likely not doing active SEO around the specific article for a keyword search to trigger the article to show up on Google. The college would have to tie in their earned media with an active

SEO campaign to bring the two together, with posts, links, backlinking, etc. to have it be helpful.

Earned media does create online search, which will help drive traffic to the college's website. The college has to be active with digital campaigns through SEO or pay-per-click (PPC), however, to ensure the website is showing up when a search is being done.

13. How is the pandemic affecting the student journey?

Typically, the student journey pre-COVID was between six months and a year before students converted. This is from when they started their research to when they actually applied or enrolled. It might be longer now, but Google hasn't released any data on it as it's too early to tell. However, we can tell that student behavior is changing, with more and more time being spent on social media apps, searching, and streaming.

14. How do we maximize voice search? How does this work?

ReachLocal automatically spends your SEM budget on voice search and traditional search where keywords are typed into a search engine. We can also include more "long-tail" keywords, which are keywords that are more like a person is talking instead of typing. For example, we can bid on keywords based on how people type, such as "community college online programs" and include keywords for voice search such as "hey Google, tell me popular online programs at colleges." ReachLocal's software adjusts your budget between both to utilize both types of search.

15. With most of higher ed across the country going to online classes, how do we differentiate?

You have the community focus and connection to help differentiate you. Look at how you can provide additional services, i.e. drive-up food and tech support for students in need. Find ways to bring the advantages of being close by to benefit your students who are still in your neighborhoods, even if online. They don't need to feel like they're hundreds of miles away as they might taking online classes from an institution that is not in your community like you are.

Now is the time for community colleges to create an e-life experience. Right now, most of the "life" happens on campus, and it hasn't really been much compared to the experience four-year schools have offered in the past. One idea is turning the focus to creating an online experience with a commons for gatherings, club meetings, homework, and even esports teams. Attracting a generation of students who already believe you don't offer them a social life is going to require you to do more. On the Internet, it's hard to tell how big your campus is. How you project yourself and the experience you can create in the

virtual world matters.

16. How can we deliver on our promise (our brand) when we don't know what to expect after COVID-19?

Your brand promise should be your brand promise regardless of time, place, or issue. Whatever value proposition you're delivering, you can and should still deliver it whether in person or online, in good times or in bad. When you think about it, it's kind of like a marriage vow. If you remain consistent in who you are, and make meaningful, emotional connections with your constituents that help them during this time, you will continue to build engagement that leads to stronger brand loyalty beyond the pandemic.

17. How much do we emphasize the pandemic in our Google messaging? Or should it be more "business as usual"?

Google doesn't have data on this yet, and it can vary from college to college. It's important to keep the hope alive for students. Colleges are here for students now and will be ready to help them when campuses open back up. Your advertising creatives now should be hopeful, positive, and encouraging.

On the other hand, even though everyone is a little depressed, to not mention the pandemic at all as the reason behind the changes you and your college are making may make you appear to be unaware and out of touch. Letting people know that your college is working to make this experience more bearable and more livable lets them know that you are in the same boat and that you are reaching out to make their experience a little better.

18. How do we keep the human connection in an all-digital world?

Using real students and professors in ads, videos, stories, and video reviews/interviews is a great way to show the human element. Personal touches through your outreach (such as using the student's name in an email) is another great strategy for this.

19. What type of messaging and design resonates with students?

The cheapest resource for knowing what resonates with any age student is to go to the websites and publications that are most popular with each group. That said, there are age, gender, and regional variations in taste, to only mention a few. Starting with the initial research above and doing A/B testing on your creatives and messaging is a great way to get data on this. Before you show or test anything, it's a good idea to make sure you have

agreement from your leadership team that they will approve what students like. That way, you don't have administrators trying to pick what they think looks cool.

## 20. How do we recruit students? How do we convert applications to enrolled students?

For media buys, CRM targeting works well for attracting students who have applied but not enrolled. This can be done through Facebook, Instagram, Google display and over-the-top video streaming (OTT), and Snapchat.

Using a full funnel marketing approach of pay-per-click (PPC), search engine optimization (SEO), social media, Google display, YouTube, and OTT works well to recruit students. You have to find students on platforms that they spend time on and make sure that you remarket to them to convert them when they are ready to apply.

It's likely that your college may be losing somewhere around 50% of all of the students who make an inquiry to your college between the inquiry point and when they show up to classes. Those conversion rates, from inquiry to application, application to financial aid, financial aid to registration, and registration to day one of classes, are different with every college because colleges have different processes and people that impact the student experience.

Another great strategy is looking at your onboarding pipeline as a series of steps or gates and gathering all of the communications from all the departments and services that are used to pull them through that pipeline. Once you've done that, you can review those documents, emails, texts, calls, and flyers for their level of friendliness and warmth, as well as their levels of information-overload. When you see what your college is showing your students as a whole, it's easier to see why students tend to opt out. Actively "cleaning up" the communications and creating a real sense of welcome to the college is a powerful step in increasing your conversion.

## 21. Should we focus more on recruitment or retention?

It costs more to recruit new students than to keep current students. So, while you need to be strategic and plan appropriately to put measurable tactics in place that attract and engage both new and current students, you should first make sure you are doing everything you can to keep the students you already have and to bring back the ones you once had. You already have connections with them, and you know where to find them. Plus, with "word of mouth" marketing still a considerable recruitment tool for community colleges, happy, successful students are going to be singing your praises and demonstrating, quite literally, that attending your college was worth the investment.