

A large, light gray funnel is positioned in the center of the page. Numerous white, paper-like shapes are shown falling into the funnel from the top, with some pieces scattered around it. The background is a solid light blue. At the bottom of the page, there is a dark, abstract geometric pattern in shades of black, brown, and gray, with several thin blue lines extending upwards from it.

GETTING PERSONAL WITH PROSPECTS

How to ensure the best-fitting students make it through your admissions funnel.

By Donna Davis



Avery M. looks like a great prospect for your school's incoming 9th-grade class. She scored well on the admissions test, and she was upbeat and articulate in her interview. She's a regular volunteer at her local animal shelter and a competitive volleyball player with plans to major in physics in college. Her parents filled out the application and submitted their deposit well before the deadline. The admissions committee approves her application, so the school sends her an enrollment offer. The answer comes back just as promptly: Thanks, but no thanks.

Why does such a strong prospect get away from your school — and how can you avoid losing more such well-fitting students? To answer that question, many admissions officers and their administrative colleagues are looking deeper to analyze data from every stage of the admissions process. Increasingly, they're emerging with highly personalized ways to guide prospective families and their students through that process to enrollment.

Take the hypothetical example of Avery. Let's say your admissions director makes a follow-up call to the family, asking why she did not enroll. Avery's mother explains she had chosen another

school — one of three where she had applied and been accepted. And, "We decided your school wasn't the right fit." Probing, the admissions director learns that on her visit to your school, Avery spent time watching a lecture in the freshman biology lab instead of experiencing the hands-on maker space that your website touts and where her interests lie.

Anything else? Avery, it turns out, also got a more generous financial aid package from her selected school.

That's information your school can work with. Ideally, your admissions director will take that information back to her staff, the business office, the head of school, the dean of faculty and other key administrators. Together, they'll make changes to ensure that prospective families get a more in-depth, high-touch experience in areas ranging from student interests to financial need going forward.

Best Foot Forward

In its 2014 report *The Ride to Independent Schools*, the Enrollment Management Association (formerly SSATB) looked at the deciding factors for families in choosing independent schools. Not surprisingly, financial reasons ranked highest, highlighting "the importance of communicating your value proposition," said Aimee Gruber, senior director of outreach and business development. Schools must make more than a financial case, though, as students themselves have a growing voice in the selection process. "One-third of the kids reported they dropped a school from their list because of a negative experience," said Gruber. Such experiences might simply reflect a student's reaction to a rainy day on campus or an isolated teaching approach. Even so, schools should strive to learn about these experiences and adjust where possible.

Nor can schools continue to rely on the traditional admissions funnel to predict enrollment. "The ability

to predict yield is becoming more complicated and complex, so a school's ability to give families what they want becomes that much more paramount," said Nicole Suozzi, EMA's chief member relations officer. "That includes personalization, a good experience on campus and feeling what it would be like there as a student."

"There is a critical need for heads, administrators and teachers to realize that you can't afford not to put your best foot forward every single day," Gruber agreed. This philosophy holds true not just on open-house, shadow and revisit days, but throughout the admissions journey.

Many independent schools are stepping up to the challenge. In EMA's *2016 State of the Independent School Admission Industry* report, at least half the schools responding said they are sponsoring more school tours and community events, creating more videos and other "story-filled windows into campus life," and educating faculty and staff about the importance of admissions and marketing. "These are all efforts that can offer prospective students a more personal experience," the report noted.



What Families Want During the Admissions Process

- More opportunities to interact with current students
- More opportunities to visit classes
- More opportunities to interact with teachers
- More information about academic programs
- More information about the admissions process and expectations for applicants

Source: "The Ride to Independent Schools," the Enrollment Management Association



Photos courtesy of Riverdale Country School

High-Value Touch Points

Increasingly, a student's interest in a school starts when the school demonstrates a distinct understanding of his or her wants, needs, expectations and concerns. Show empathy for prospective students and families on every step of the journey, according to Pam Mason-Norsworthy and Angie Jackson of Crane MetaMarketing, which works with a variety of educational and nonprofit organizations. Consider the accuracy of your website: Does it need updating so prospects won't be surprised by changes in staff or programs? Become familiar with their needs and interests, and show that you appreciate the value of their time.

Positive visits are essential. "When you first see the school, you're 'smelling' the culture," said Mason-Norsworthy. Fine-tuning visits to each student's interests can enhance that sense of smell. "Pick five spots on campus that shine and highlight the culture of your school or the learning experience," Jackson said. Then, interpret what your visitors see.

Be alert to opportunities to provide context. For instance, let visitors know that those third-graders who are running around and shouting aren't out



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of control; they're engaged in a book discussion. Some are acting out its ending, and others are collaborating on a letter to the author.

Send visitors home with something that reminds them to apply — and follow up with a personal call or a note, not a boilerplate email.

Be sure these types of "high-value touch points" carry over into acceptance letters too, Jackson said. Enrolling in your school may represent "the most significant investment many of these families have made financially, emotionally and in terms of time. It

should be a huge celebration of this milestone in this family's life, and it needs to be as engaging and warm as the school they toured and website they visited." Some schools add an additional personal touch at this time — for instance, a teacher or coach who calls to congratulate the family and learn more about the student's interests.

Don't be afraid to follow up with families who choose another school. Maybe it's not the admissions staffer who makes the call, but a division head. Whoever makes this call, it gives the school one more "opportunity to wish the family well and to say if you ever need us again, we are here," Mason-Norsworthy said. "Even though your feelings are hurt that they didn't pick you, you have to swallow your pride to keep that relationship positive and welcoming should there be another opportunity to engage."

Different Schools, Same Goals

Riverdale Country School

Riverdale Country School, an 1,140-student, preK through 12 day school in Bronx, New York, has the

luxury of the huge New York City market — but that advantage also means a wealth of competition. Some students apply to eight or 10 schools. Jenna Rogers King, director of admission and enrollment, strives to find out the hard facts about why accepted students do or don't ultimately choose Riverdale. "Using data rather than anecdotal information to understand other people's perspectives on your school is so important," she said. "Sometimes we think our school showed a certain way, but (some visitors) might think we really missed the mark."

The school regularly evaluates its events and communications, from website to printed materials, seeking feedback from families, faculty and staff. Using a tool as simple and affordable as SurveyMonkey, King also surveys families who are accepted but don't enroll. The input helps make the common but abstract "not the right fit" response much more specific and actionable, she said. "Sometimes we don't offer the extracurricular activity that is important to the child. Or something on a visit day that didn't sit right with them led them to make conclusions about the school. They didn't get the right experience."

The flow of information and feedback includes faculty, staff and current students so all "can be a part of putting our best foot forward in all kinds of events," said King. For example, she sat down recently to talk with a 9th-grader who had struggled between choosing Riverdale and another school. He ultimately picked Riverdale despite his view of a less-than-ideal revisit day in which he felt he hadn't gotten a sense of the interdisciplinary courses for 11th- and 12th-graders. That conversation, King explained, led to a revision of revisit days to showcase those courses, which include team-taught physics/calculus and American history/English. "We are trying to feature our best selves and what makes us different," she said.

In line with EMA's findings, families in the follow-up surveys also have told



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*—Jenna Rogers King,
Riverdale Country School*

King that when they visit they want opportunities to interact with current students and teachers. "They really want to know what a day in the life is going to be like. They really want a personalized experience," she said. If the student is a baseball player, for example, "they want to know that you thought about a way to help him get to know the baseball program."

Data from Riverdale Country School's follow-ups also reveal positive elements to build on. For instance, families have indicated they enjoy "feeling known and heard" on their visits, King said. "Academic fit comes first, but it's [also] about whether they

see kids with whom they can connect and develop a rapport."

Colorado Rocky Mountain School

Colorado Rocky Mountain School, in Carbondale, Colorado, is about as different in location and size from Riverdale as a school can be. But the schools share similar practices of examining results and personalizing the admissions experience.

CRMS, a boarding and day school with 175 students in grades 9 through 12, doesn't have the sophisticated customer relationship management system that a larger school might be able to afford. Instead, it created a homegrown "touch-point management system" that tracks how many "touches" the admissions office makes for each student during the admissions process.

The program came about as the school brainstormed ways to maximize its admissions results with the limited staff and financial resources of a small school.

"Our head of school adopted the personal motto that we will take better care of our students than any other school," said Molly Dorais, director of admission and financial aid. "So we



thought, ‘How can we take better care of our applicants than any other school?’”

That meant uncovering lost opportunities to reach out to prospective students. Dorais and her colleagues use analytics to assess activity in the school’s online admissions system, calculating yield at various stages of the funnel and looking for trends in student type (boarding or day) as well as gender. In many cases, they learned, individuals would open the application but not complete it. They now send a personalized, follow-up communication to every family that opens an online application account. It outlines the steps of the application process, along with specific information about a program or area of interest.

Other touches along the way: personal emails and letters to applicants, customized newsletters, handwritten notes from current students, calls from current parents and a parting gift for students who complete a visit and interview. In all, CRMS makes an average of 25 “touches” per family from the time they open an application to the time they enroll their child at the school.

Like Riverdale, CRMS surveys families of accepted students who don’t enroll. A key question toward the end of the survey asks whether they did not enroll in the school. The multiple choice options are:

- *too academically challenging*
- *not academically challenging enough*



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—Molly Dorais, *Colorado Rocky Mountain School*

- *outdoor program*
- *student body*
- *location of the school*
- *financial reasons*
- *other reasons (please specify)*

“Some kids aren’t ready for boarding school,” while others want to stay closer to home, Dorais said. “Finances can be an issue, as well as competition with other boarding schools.” But the school makes a point of communicating its unique features, such as its 325-acre mountain campus and outdoor activities. “We are a niche school . . . we don’t struggle with how to differentiate ourselves.”

The outreach continues once students are enrolled. Every spring, CRMS sends an 11-question survey to every admitted family, surveying parents and students separately. “Some of the questions are about their visit to campus

and their experience [with the tour guide, in visiting classes, interacting with students, etc.] in the admissions process,” Dorais said.

Assuring the Future

In its 2016 report, EMA noted a “disconnect” between enrollment results and future projections. “Twenty-two percent [of schools] did not meet either net tuition or enrollment goals,” Gruber said. Yet nearly half of admissions directors projected “excellent” or “very good” enrollment growth in the next five years. Taking steps to convert strong inquiries and applicants into enrolled students can help close that gap.

With the right touches along the way, schools will attract the best-fitting students. “They will agree with your philosophy and they will stay,” said Jackson of Crane MetaMarketing. Ideally as well, “they will be donors because they got what they expected.” ■



Based in Boulder, Colorado, **Donna Davis** has written for Net Assets since 2008. Her last contribution, “Refining Your Data,” appeared in the September/October issue.

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OTHER RESOURCES

The Ride to Independent Schools enrollment.org/whytheyapply

2016 State of the Independent School Admission Industry enrollment.org/specialreports

Crane MetaMarketing Ltd. www.cranebrandwork.com