Talking to the "Me" Generation Directly, on Their Terms…

By Mitch Talenfeld and Barrie Waisserberg, MDT Direct

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Building a Communications Strategy That Speaks to Today's Prospective Student

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While everyone is focusing on "the next big thing" in communications, it's critical not to lose sight of the key component in any communication – the recipient. Receiving a personalized message strikes a chord that a generic ad cannot. With the explosion of social media, students today are used to being addressed individually and expect to be communicated with on their chosen terms.

Personalized or not, people are bombarded with messages today from all different directions. How do you make yours stand out?

Communications today are no longer about a single item. A lone email, postcard or other piece cannot generate the same results as it used to. In order to be effective, marketing and communications are blending to create an ongoing dialogue rather than a quick "hello." Multi-channel, multi-media programs allow schools to communicate their message to prospective and current students through their preferred methods, increasing return contact.

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Think about it. Once a prospective student's school search process begins, they are overloaded with information

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after the first request. They may receive numerous calls, emails and other communications from many different schools. So the question remains: How do you break through the clutter?

When prospective students ask for information about your school, they often supply you with their name, their program of interest and other important information that lets you know how to

respond to their needs. So why limit your response to sending those generalized automated emails and having admissions people making phone calls? In today's world people want instant gratification and don't always communicate by

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In this ultra-fractured media environment where people see thousands of advertisements everyday, a well-executed multi-channel communications follow-up program, which can be personalized to each student, is critical to an organization's success. A process that includes multiple channels such as social media, direct mail, email, phone calls, text messaging, and personalized mobile-friendly websites is worth considering. Programs that include elements such as relevant video, program-specific pictures and information, audio messaging and chat-access

have a much better chance of grabbing people's attention and engaging them in conversation.

How can multi-channel communications help your school? Check out these stats from a 2013 case study of a fall 2012 campaign for Lyon College.[1] They developed a multi-channel campaign that incorporated direct mail, personalized landing pages (PURLs), email and augmented reality. This campaign began in August 2012. Through November 2012 it had achieved the following positive results:

~ 2.85% of recipients visited their Personalized URL.

~ Of those that visited their Personalized URL, 70% of the respondents completed the online survey/entry form.

~ 76% increase in applications received compared to the same time period of the previous year.

~ 1,116 applications received. This represents a 70% increase over the goal.

~ The total applications received as of November 2012 already exceeded the total

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[1] Case Study: LYON COLLEGE USES CROSS-MEDIA TO DRIVE NEW APPLICATIONS, © 2013 W. Caslon & Company.

MITCH TALENFELD is the CEO of MDT Direct. He has been involved in advertising and marketing for over 30 years. He has conducted numerous advertising seminars, spoken at national and state conventions and published many articles on this field. Mitch was recognized at the 2011 APSCU Convention as the Allied Member of the Year and has received the Florida Direct Marketing Association's highest honor, the Golden Conch Award, for outstanding leadership and achievements in the direct marketing industry.

BARRIE WAISSERBERG is the vice president of marketing and operations at MDT Direct. She has a master's degree in marketing and management. She has been with MDT Direct since 2000, working closely with the industry's top leaders. Barrie creates specialized marketing programs for MDT Direct and its clients, helping everyone stay on the leading edge of today's trends.

ABOUT MDT DIRECT

MDT Direct does business with schools and colleges nationwide, helping them to improve their advertising, communication and admission's effectiveness. By combining the use of traditional direct marketing techniques with some of today's cutting-edge technology, MDT Direct has been a leader in the world of traditional school advertising for over 17 years.

number of applications received during their entire benchmark year of 2009 (one of their best recruitment years on record).

~ 50% increase in acceptances (applicants who have qualified for admission) compared to the same time period of the previous year.

~ Deposits received for holding a place in the 2013 freshmen class, increased 18.6% as compared to previous year.

~ Additionally, certain direct mail pieces sent in previous years were NOT sent this year, in favor of fewer, more personalized pieces. As a result, total direct marketing spend for this campaign as compared to 2011 decreased nearly 30%.

Similar case studies have produced similar results – multiple communications, across multiple media channels, personalized to the recipient WORK.

There are many different stand-alone solutions available in today's media marketplace—each system occupying its own niche in the mix and being good for what it is. However, integrating all of your systems together will create consistency and scalability, giving you the best possible chance of creating an effective long-term communication solution. The question is, how?

Effective multi-channel campaigns are more successful than generic communications, but also require more effort to get started. Simple programs can give you a quick fix, but why would you want your communications to be generic? Your school isn't.

A clearly defined, well-planned multi-channel, personalized campaign may require expertise and some technical work to set up, however the results well justify the extra effort. What does it take? The critical components of any multi-channel campaign are as follows:

Accurate Database – Everything starts with data. You've heard the expression, "garbage in, garbage out." There was never a truer statement when it comes to executing a personalized multi-media campaign. It is critical that your database is as complete as possible including physical addresses, email addresses and phone numbers. It is also

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critical that data points be consistent: program names are all the same, addresses are correct and standardized for mailing purposes, email addresses are properly formatted and people's names are spelled correctly. While those items are only a small part of your data, every single component of it is critical. In any given program, there could be dozens of other checklist items that need attention.

Integrated Systems – The best data in the world is useless unless it is working for you. Digital systems and sources can be integrated together and are readily available. Those include campus student information systems, call management systems, your website, Internet management systems, data verification systems, third-party vendor management systems and general marketing/CRM systems. Any or all of these can be integrated together so accurate data flows in real-time—a critical component in executing an automated, multi-channel communications system.

Accurate Database – Did we mention how critical it is to manage and optimize your data? Data is constantly flowing in from multiple sources. Finding a way to integrate the sources and standardize the data is the key to

the success of any personalized, multi-channel campaign.

Development Team – Developing a multi-channel program is not for the meek. Choose your marketing team wisely – experience counts! The team leader that is actually in charge of doing the work is critical to your success. This person must have the knowledge,

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experience, organization and vision to execute effectively. The team members must consist of programmers, system integration experts, data gurus, copywriters, website developers, designers, analysts and proofreaders. Your internal team must buy into the process. Make sure to include your internal marketing, admissions and technology teams in the process so everything runs smoothly.

Attempting to send out a scheduled series of emails, mailings and text messages, or any other combination, directing your students to a dynamically created website that pulls information from multiple sources can be tricky and requires significant forethought and preparation from the entire team.

Accurate Database – Again, we need to point out the importance of data. Developing a multi-channel program can be for naught if your data is not accurate. The point is to reach the recipient with a meaningful message, with something relative to their lives. Inaccurate data could have you not only sending non-personalized pieces but also sending pieces with messaging completely opposite of what interests your recipient.

Structure and Time – Do not rush the process. Pre-planning is critical to your success. Develop the structure of the campaign so changes can be made less expensively. What might seem like a simple change or add-on will most likely affect multiple systems.

Accurate Database – Structuring your multi-channel programs around your data allows you to effectively communicate with your recipients when and how they prefer. Keeping accurate and complete records will prevent you from having to restructure an almost-completed campaign for missing elements.

Proofing/Ongoing Testing – Proofing each element to check that everything populates correctly and communication flow is following the project plan.

Accurate Database – In a multi-channel campaign, everything is data driven – program information, pictures, logos, addresses…the list goes on and on. For everything to work as it should, your data has to have the details your program needs. People will spend hours proofing a program, wondering why something is not right, when it was never going to be right to begin with. Again, it all comes down to the critical need for concise, consistent data flowing into your program.

Reports – Real-time reports that track every aspect of the program enable you to make mid-stream adjustments that are critical to your success.

Accurate Database – Emphasizing one more time how important data accuracy is to a multi-channel, or any other, program. To measure the success of your campaign, you need to rely on accurate reporting. Starting with crippled data will cause your end reports to show you nothing but fractured pieces of

your entire program. A solid, functional starting database will give you robust and reliable end-reporting for informed and successful decisions.

Traditional media still has its place in today's communications. The key is to use it together with your digital media to create a multi-channel, highly targeted or personalized messaging flow – increasing your message's impact and improving response. The end-goal of any communications campaign, whether it is inbound marketing, retention, payment reminders or placement follow-up, is to elicit a response or action from the recipient. Multi-channel communications improve message reception, speak directly to the prospect and create contact.

Now, you are probably asking, or should be asking, whether developing personalized, multi-channel communications programs are worth

the time and expense to develop and execute. When you stop to think about how many people you aren't reaching with your present inquiry generation, follow-up and retention programs, the benefits start to outweigh the costs. How much would it take in additional tuition to offset the upfront expenses to develop a program such as this? Based on the results we've seen, there is no question – multi-channel, personalized programs are worth every penny spent on them.

Building a communications strategy that speaks to your prospective and current students on their terms may be a challenge, but, in our opinion, a necessary challenge to contend in today's competitive communications environment.

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