The core values of Seton Hall University meant a lot to Rob Brosnan when he joined its staff six years ago. What resonated most strongly to Brosnan was Seton Hall’s deeply rooted commitment to leadership through service to others. It was about being part of a community that can make a difference. Assuming the newly created role of Senior Director of Strategic Marketing, Brosnan knew he had an opportunity to make such a difference. His broad mission was to transform the means by which Seton Hall made its case to prospective incoming students, from the time they first express interest in the university to their enrollment — and all points along the way. That last caveat is significant, for the overall intake cycle can last as long as 36 months, beginning in the student’s sophomore year of high school.

By and large, the length of the recruitment cycle has been a long-standing part of the landscape for marketers in higher education, as is the core mission of delivering a strong brand message and attracting the best students. The importance of Brosnan’s role — as with colleagues at other universities — derives from significant changes in the way student prospects go about making what may well be the most influential decision of their lives. It’s no revelation that students face more pressure than ever to choose the right school. Enabled by technology, students are not only comparing a larger number of schools, but also applying to more to maximize their options.

Leadership Spotlight

Rob Brosnan’s reluctance to take things on faith serves him well as Senior Director of Strategic Marketing at Seton Hall University. With competition for the best and the brightest students tougher than ever, Brosnan was determined to leverage marketing analytics to get a granular understanding of what’s happening in the recruitment pipeline and make decisions that produce the highest yield.

How Seton Hall got smarter

Seton Hall recognized that with the decision process getting longer and more complicated for incoming candidates, it needed to tailor its marketing strategies and resources to different parts of the cycle, while at the same time expanding the role of social media. Using advanced marketing analytics, Seton Hall was able to gauge the impact of specific marketing programs, and thus make more intelligent marketing decisions that engage prospects more deeply. By infusing marketing intelligence into its recruitment process, Seton Hall was able to increase its prospect conversion rate by 18.2 percent in just the first year.
A new ballgame

Seton Hall, which has built a powerful reputation for quality, doesn’t shrink from this intensifying competition for students. But it does recognize the risks it poses on the operational level, the biggest of which, says Brosnan, is the university not making the fall enrollment numbers. “At one time, we could take our March deposits and begin to forecast our September numbers, and from them our budgets,” says Brosnan. “The truth is that as kids send out more applications, they’re moving the decision to much later in the cycle, with a greater number leaving deposits at multiple schools and in some cases even attending multiple orientations. This amplifies the uncertainty and makes forecasting much more of a challenge.”

Brosnan entered the picture at a time when Seton Hall was just beginning to grasp the implications of this new decision environment. In the years preceding his arrival, the Admissions Office had conducted a stepped up communications program that successfully increased the flow of prospects into the recruitment “funnel” (in college admissions parlance) and engaged them earlier in the process. However, the conversion of these prospects to actual enrolled students—the yield rate—was flat. They wanted to know why and what they could do to increase it.

Looking into the pipeline

That required a better understanding of what went on inside the pipeline than the traditionally opaque system would allow. From the time prospects enter the funnel, measures of their fall intentions—how they’re thinking, who they’re talking to and how they feel about Seton Hall—have traditionally been an uncomfortable “blind spot” until enrollment time. It’s analogous, on some levels, to one of the quirks of lunar exploration, that spacecraft passing behind the moon “went silent” since they were out of direct radio communication with the Earth. Only when they reemerged was contact reestablished and the true situation with the spacecraft detectable to nervous controllers on the ground. Traditionally, college admissions personnel have had to endure a comparable period of anxious waiting.

The benefits of Seton Hall’s marketing analytics solution

• 18.2 percent year-to-year increase in enrollment candidate conversion rate, representing an additional US$29 million in tuition revenues by leveraging Facebook and social media metrics analysis.
• 25 percent increase in tuition deposits due to the ability to attract prospective students faster.
• Improved ability to target marketing programs and resources.
• Improved accuracy in freshmen enrollment forecasts.
But Brosnan recognized that the added length and complexity of the enrollment process required a more targeted and granular marketing approach, with campaigns and resources focused on specific phases of the overall recruitment cycle. With academic training in physics and an empirical streak by nature, Brosnan also recognized that the ability to measure campaign effectiveness—the relative impact of each marketing activity on conversion rates—was of paramount importance. Put simply, the more granular an understanding of what works, the better Brosnan and his clients are able to apply the most effective marketing tools for the situation.

While the Admissions Office was the initial trigger for the smarter recruiting initiative, Brosnan’s ultimate clients were the leaders of Seton Hall’s academic programs. His role in the process was to work with each client to design the most effective communications strategy and, if necessary, to make adjustments along the way to ensure their goals are met. At the earliest stages, Brosnan needed to get his clients on board with the new approach to recruitment marketing—one that was a marked departure from what they were used to—but he faced a conundrum. “I needed to convince clients to change the way they thought about marketing their programs, but because we were just starting, we didn’t have anything substantive to make that case,” Brosnan explains. “That made getting performance analytics data top priority.”

Building the case for analytics

Though Brosnan knew he couldn’t get far without Seton Hall’s IT organization, he recognized from a cultural standpoint, getting its support to purchase a marketing analytics solution would be a tough pill to swallow. It was—initially. But then came two crucial developments. The first was a strong show of support from CIO Stephen Landry, who lent valuable credibility to the vision Brosnan had laid out. Even stronger support came from the process owner—VP for Student Affairs and Enrollment Services Laura Wankel—who not only validated the goal of looking more deeply into the recruitment cycle, but also provided valuable insights as to which points in the process to focus on.

The following months were eventful. Not long after Seton Hall first began using Coremetrics Digital Marketing Optimization Platform to analyze its campaign and recruitment data, subtle yet interesting patterns had begun to emerge that caused Brosnan’s academic clients to take notice. To deliver these results and discuss their implications, he had instituted monthly meetings, held individually with each of his clients. In the earliest meetings, lingering signs of ambivalence to the new approach weren’t uncommon. But over time, as the data began to reveal messages that clients could relate to the success of their programs, attitudes soon shifted. Clients who, at one point, weren’t even sure of the purpose of the debriefings were now beginning to clamor for more.

Lessons learned

Keep it simple
Rob Brosnan found that the key to getting academic leaders to buy into the notion of data-driven marketing decisions is to keep it simple and the reasons for doing it clear.

“People running academic programs are busy. They don’t want to know about jargon like ‘bounce rates.’ What they do focus on is the risk of failure [to make the numbers]. Our message is how to help them avoid that.”

– Rob Brosnan

Leadership is…

Building support from within
Ever the realist, Rob Brosnan knew he needed support in the right places to transform the way Seton Hall marketed itself to candidates in the “pipeline.” Convincing the leaders of IT and Enrollment Services of the viability of his vision established a critical beachhead of support to start from.

“We learned the value of finding someone who could go to bat for us when the going was tough.”

– Rob Brosnan, Senior Director of Strategic Marketing, Seton Hall University

...the ability to measure campaign effectiveness—the relative impact of each marketing activity on conversion rates—was of paramount importance.
Sowing the seeds of community

Recognizing the potential for social media as a new channel to boost marketing and recruitment efforts, Brosnan and his team created a Facebook page known as the Class of 2014, with the purpose of engaging potential Seton Hall recruits in the coming school year. As they watched over the course of six months, traffic on the site grew steadily, communities sprang up and flourished, and the traffic began to surge. Through Coremetrics, Brosnan could see that the Class of 2014 Facebook site was proving to be a hotbed of interaction among that fall’s enrollment candidates, the net result of which was a higher level of engagement at a critical point in the pipeline. But to Brosnan, perhaps the biggest takeaway was the changing dynamics of the decision process itself. “We were seeing the selection process taking on a ‘group’ or peer-to-peer quality,” says Brosnan. “The community interactions were having a real influence on the mechanics of the decision process.”

While a high level of prospect engagement is a good thing by any measure, Seton Hall’s bottom-line priority was to translate a higher proportion of its candidates to enrolled students in the fall. Brosnan’s instincts pointed in that direction. But it was Coremetrics that helped him prove it. Using Coremetrics Impression Attribution, Brosnan was able to correlate specific Facebook activities with the likelihood that candidates would complete various milestones (such as the completion of forms and applications) on the path to enrollment. By gaining visibility into which social media practices—part art, part science—work best, Seton Hall took a major step forward in optimizing its marketing strategies for maximum yield.

A few weeks later, when Brosnan sat down with a group of Seton Hall leaders (that included the Dean of Admissions) to discuss ways of boosting enrollment yield in the coming fall, he gave Facebook top billing. “I presented a chart that showed how prospects are becoming more engaged not just because of what [Seton Hall] is doing, but because they’re connecting with one another,” Brosnan explains. “A year before, they would need to show up on campus to experience what Seton Hall is like. Now they’re creating that experience themselves.”

---

Seton Hall: The parameters of smarter recruitment

- **Instrumented**
  Captures information about prospective students’ interests and questions by tagging Facebook pages with impression attribution tags, which provides an understanding of how incoming freshmen use Facebook.

- **Interconnected**
  Links online and offline marketing data, which allows the university to maximize marketing spend with outreach programs most likely to provide results.

- **Intelligent**
  Identifies correlations between social media usage and traditional marketing campaigns with subsequent applications and enrollments.
That discussion went a long way toward convincing Seton Hall’s leadership of the importance of social media and analytics in recruitment marketing strategy. But only a few months later, they received an even stronger validation in the form of strong recruitment numbers. By leveraging their social media intelligence, and adjusting marketing campaigns accordingly, Seton Hall had increased its candidate conversion rate by 18.2 percent over the prior year, representing an additional US$29 million in tuition revenues.

The evidence of how deeply analytics has become embedded in Seton Hall’s marketing efforts isn’t hard to find. It’s seen in how once skeptical clients are now bursting with new ideas and enthusiasm in their monthly meetings with Brosnan. It’s also seen in the widely attended “war” (Web Analytics Review) call he conducts every Monday morning to go over the numbers. Most of all, Brosnan believes it’s changing the way people think about recruitment marketing. “The combination of social media and analytics represents not only a new channel, but a whole new way of nurturing relationships through stronger engagement,” says Brosnan. “That approach is a perfect complement to the strength of Seton Hall’s brand message.”