

insights

Creating an inbound marketing strategy for schools

↳ The ultimate guide to growing your school's online community.



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Let's get started!

Calling all school marketers! **Inbound marketing** is the strategy of choice for schools all around the world. This approach helps you to recruit families to your school by producing valuable content that addresses their specific needs and interests.

If you want to position your school as the **best choice** for prospective families in your district, then inbound marketing is the way to go. This comprehensive guide will help you to understand the inbound methodology and how your school can put it to work by creating a tailored strategy.





01

What is inbound marketing?

Inbound marketing is a strategy that involves **creating content that will draw customers** (or in your case, students and families) to your school. Rather than competing for admissions using pushy sales tactics, you are instead engaging them naturally, positioning your school as the best choice for prospective families in your district.

Why inbound marketing works

Inbound marketing is a great strategy to employ because it draws prospective parents to your school; however, they aren't left with the icky feeling that your school is trying to sell to them. Rather than interrupting their day with your marketing messages, instead, you're simply **showing up** in the places that they're already looking, with valuable and helpful information.

The leads you acquire through inbound marketing are far more qualified and likely to enroll in your school because they already have a genuine interest in what your school has to offer. As an added bonus, because inbound marketing relies on content creation rather than advertising dollars, it's far more cost-effective for schools to implement on a budget.



To further explore why inbound marketing works, you'll need to understand:

- 1 The inbound marketing model
- 2 Inbound vs. outbound marketing tactics
- 3 How inbound marketing influences the customer journey

The inbound marketing model

While traditional marketing methods employ a 'funnel' (or top-down) approach, the inbound marketing methodology follows the **flywheel model**. This model is where marketing, sales, and customer service all work together throughout the process, placing the customer at the center.

The flywheel model operates in three stages:

- **Attract:** draw leads to your business by creating relevant and valuable content to address a specific need or problem.
- **Engage:** nurture relationships and build trust in your brand through valuable content that aims to educate or inspire.
- **Delight:** provide a fantastic customer experience throughout the sales process, and continue doing so throughout the entire customer lifecycle.

02

Inbound *vs.* outbound marketing

As we mentioned, inbound marketing strategies focus on **content creation** that naturally recruits families to your school. On the other hand, *outbound* marketing strategies are typically associated with ‘advertising’ – pushing out a singular message and hoping that it resonates with the people who see it.

In this way, outbound marketing can be very much a one-way conversation. Outbound tactics that you’d be familiar with include:

- Pay-per-click advertising, such as Google ads
- Cold calling
- Print advertising
- TV and radio advertising
- Trade show booths

Where outbound marketing focuses on making a sale, inbound marketing is all about listening to your audience's specific concerns to create a dialogue. Inbound marketing is often more successful in the long run, as it aims to build trust and credibility. That means, when it comes to making a purchasing decision, your brand has already situated itself favorably in your target audience's mind. Win-win, right?

03



How inbound marketing influences the customer journey

The customer journey (or buyer's journey) is a commonly-used term in B2B marketing but is easily adaptable to other areas, including school marketing. It refers to the steps that potential customers, or in your case, prospective families, take in the lead-up to making a decision. Each stage of the buyer's journey is an opportunity for you to add value to the family's experience, all the while encouraging them to choose your school.

Awareness

The buyer's journey starts with the **awareness** step, wherein your customers (the parents or guardians) discover that they need to enroll their child in school (or move them into a new school). Your job is to guide them through this time by identifying their key concerns when it comes to their child's education — this could be anything from making friends to class sizes, school fees to religion, and spirituality.

One key way to identify families' needs is to ask them during the admissions process. You can set up a short questionnaire through email or include a field in your school's expression of interest form for prospective families to fill in. You can also ask families in person over the phone, during your school tour, or in the interview stage. Use your resources — even teachers and alumni will help you build up a solid bank of concerns that you then can address in your inbound strategy.

Consideration

The next step is the **consideration** stage, where your prospective families are actively thinking about whether to enroll their child in your school. Perhaps they've narrowed it down to a few options and are now performing in-depth research to determine which school will be the perfect fit. In this stage, you can focus more on how your school will address its issues and concerns using an array of tactics.

Once again, you'll want to focus on targeted content that answers families' concerns, but this time, you can center your school as a part of the solution. Create blog posts and other pieces of unique content that really call out what sets you apart and makes your school shine. Highlighting your unique selling points (USPs) is key to converting parents from the consideration stage to the decision stage.

Decision

The **decision** stage is where your prospective parents are close to making the all-important final choice of where they'll send their child(ren) to school. This is your opportunity to truly hammer home your USPs and help them realize that your school is an undeniably perfect fit. They've taken the tour and read through all the materials. In the decision phase of the customer journey, your job is to ensure you **convert** these leads into admissions by devoting your time and attention to showing that your school is worthy of their trust and commitment.

04

Planning your inbound marketing strategy

Once you've decided that an inbound strategy could benefit your school, it's time to get cracking on creating one.

Don't be scared – developing your ideal marketing plan just consists of a few simple steps:

- 1 Set clear goals and objectives
- 2 Zero in on your audience
- 3 Choose your inbound marketing tactics
- 4 Work out how and what you'll measure
- 5 Perform a content audit

Identify your goals and objectives

First, identify the goals and objectives you're looking to meet through your marketing strategy. Maybe it's something concrete (for example, increasing your admissions applications by 10% year-on-year), or a little broader (for example, raising general awareness of your school brand in preparation for later admissions).

Other great objectives of inbound marketing strategies include:

- Encouraging form completion
- Strengthening your email database
- Engaging with alumni more effectively

No matter what goals you choose to pursue, you should always ensure that they are squarely aligned with your overall digital marketing plan. This ensures your content works alongside your other marketing efforts rather than against them.

Zero in on your audience

When developing your strategy, you will need to determine the different kinds of families and parents you expect you'll attract. This helps you to understand your **target audience** and your audience subsets, known as marketing personas.

Creating a persona is a fairly straightforward practice. You can draw on demographic information from your customer relationship manager, website, and more to help you develop a fictitious family that represents a group of *real* families at your school. You can hone in on their interests, wants, and needs to help you to better understand each subset of your audience. This in turn, allows you to create the marketing needed to transition them from prospects to leads and from leads to enrolled students.

Choose your inbound marketing tactics

There are a whole host of tactics that will benefit your inbound marketing strategy, but the most commonly used include:

- Blogging
- Downloadable resources, including eBooks and whitepapers
- Podcasting
- Video marketing
- Email marketing (EDMs)
- Social media
- Event marketing

It's no secret that **digital tactics** are imperative to your overall marketing strategy. This is because tools like Google Analytics and HubSpot, as well as the analytics available on your favorite social networks, ensure all of your digital efforts are measurable, and therefore **quantifiable** (more on that below!). Digitizing your marketing also works to increase your school's connectivity, bridging the gaps between staff, students and parents.

No matter which tactics you decide to pursue, it's incredibly important that you personalize them to your audience's context — drill down on your audience's specific interests and behaviors and provide different types of content that will engage different segments of your audience.

Work out how you'll measure 'success'

There's little reward for your efforts if you don't have a way to measure your results. This is where analytics tools come in. These powerful data aggregators allow you to play with your results, measuring a variety of different metrics as well as comparing and contrasting them. If you have the option of A/B testing — for instance, through email segmentation or landing page optimization — you can measure two potential options against one another in a controlled way.

When you're using different mediums to drive traffic to a single source, it can be helpful to set up tracking so that you know which channels are providing value. There are a few ways that you can set up tracking for your digital marketing campaigns, including using Google's campaign URL builder and tracking pixels.

It's important to educate yourself about the most common digital marketing metrics that you can use to create performance reports, such as sessions vs. conversions. Then, take a little time to qualify which metrics will be beneficial for your school to report on. If you're trying to grow your email database, then form completions will be key to your strategy. Similarly, if you want to grow traffic, measuring sessions, bounce rates, and exit rates will be crucial.

At the end of the day, it's all about testing! Take a few weeks to monitor the effectiveness of your strategies using different tools before settling on what works best for you and your reporting style.

05

Move inbound

Congratulations! Hopefully, you have all of the tools you'll need to start using inbound marketing for your school. Now it's time to put these strategies into practice.

You can start by creating a content calendar that your team can use to:

- Plan and track every piece of content you plan on publishing
- Outline responsibilities for the various tasks associated with getting it published

You can map out all of the different types of inbound marketing tactics that you have planned and how often you would like to implement them. This will give you visibility of your work well ahead of time.

If you don't have precious time to devote to really digging into your marketing strategy, consider enlisting the help of others. For instance, a dedicated marketing agency that truly understands the best practices associated with inbound marketing could be extremely beneficial. Not only will they free up a few hours in your day, but they're likely to generate exciting results – that is, if you vet and brief them first. It's important to work out exactly what your school wants and needs in terms of budget, time spent, and deliverables before engaging a marketing agency.

And that's it! You're ready to start moving inbound!



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