Admission Journey Best Practices

Tangible and practical takeaways from your peers, this section includes four segments (Marketing, Events, Yield, Retention) of school-authored best practices for each stage of the admission funnel.
They say it takes a village to come together in times of need, and this is why UNIS Hanoi has been utilizing our entire school as enrollment evangelists. While this doesn’t necessarily fall under traditional enrollment marketing practices, it has been our way of refocusing marketing strategies to meet our customers in today’s uncertain enrollment environment. Where do you begin to refocus your energies in a time when uncertain enrollment trends are not only confusing but profoundly unsettling? It’s hard enough to effectively implement standard enrollment and marketing best practices under normal conditions; now, we had to think differently to reimagine and explore new pathways. We focused on three areas to create our action plans: 1) Our Value Proposition; 2) Community; and 3) Transitions. These action plans shared the theme ‘stronger together.’ We also used the previous year’s new family survey to target areas that were parents’ pains in order to focus on making them gains.

The following are the action plans we developed to support each of our three categories:

1) VALUE PROPOSITION
Streamlined the enrollment process so key information—report cards, teacher recommendations, writing samples, interviews, etc.—was readily available on the students’ dashboards and shared with counselors and key specialist teachers for a better understanding of new students’ expectations for the 21–22 school year.

2) COMMUNITY
A Parent Ambassador Network was created with our cultural representatives from the Vietnamese, Korean, and Japanese communities to connect with new families through welcome emails, coffees, and campus tours.

Our School Community Organization (SCO) held Hanoi bus tours, hosted new parent coffees, and created a special WhatsApp group to share more information about the surrounding community and other family event opportunities.

Parent Connection events were held off campus and virtually to provide IB Programme information, EAL/Learning support, and Q&As with principals. Open house events allowed new parents to be well informed and connected.

Our Student Ambassador Program is run by a high school student. During lockdown last school year this student began designing an experience to (hopefully) exceed the new students’ expectations for the 21–22 school year.

3) TRANSITIONS
Transition Portal: Designed to help parents learn more about the school, this includes the head of school’s podcast, welcome videos from the principals, and information on how to load money on the family account for lunch and to purchase items from the school store.

Bridge Programme: Developed for the late arrivals to support their learning with a bank of resources for the Elementary School students, four-week units of learning for Secondary School students, and course work with links to teachers, for the IB DP students. This option is in effect only if school is on campus. Otherwise, new students will be part of Distance Learning until the campus reopens.

Campus Tours: Specialized for parents on the weekends with the librarians, selected teachers, and open classrooms with videos showcasing the learning.

Virtual Tour: Began in May with videos ‘Window into UNIS,’ which was supported by students and teachers during a day of learning.

Branded Gifts: Reimagined for incoming families and include blocks with instructions on how to build the Hanoi cultural icons, coloring book of key sites around Hanoi, SNAP cards using the 17 UN Sustainable Goals, playing cards using the four House Animals, and a special sketchbook for the older students. These gifts were created as fun ways to bring families together during quarantine and to connect with their new country and school.

Ultimately, what we created was a community collaboration that resulted in many memorable learning moments that elevated our positive word of mouth. The outcome of these efforts rose above our routine marketing to generate financial value to UNIS Hanoi. +

T.K. Ostrom brings over 17 years of enrollment management experience and expertise to the United Nations International School of Hanoi, where she serves as the Director of Enrollment Management and Marketing. She is part of the Strategic Leadership Team and leads key initiatives in streamlining admissions, planning recruitment, and marketing outreach, which resulted in an enrollment increase at the start of the 2019–2020 and continued into the 2020–2021 academic school year.
During the summer of 2020, when we realized that we would not be able to invite families to campus during the week or allow them to enter any of our buildings, even on weekends, we were in panic mode. Then, after speaking with an admission officer in Portland, OR, who mentioned that her school’s campus lent itself to self-guided walking tours, a light bulb went off. We scrambled to get permission from our Head of School, our Safety Officer, and county officials. We knew that even if the buildings had to be completely locked and closed, given the expansive nature of our outdoor campus, this was a fantastic way for prospective families to visit campus during the pandemic.

We had also just recently dedicated a lot of work toward creating a virtual tour (with the help of an amazing company, Circlescapes), so we decided in the interest of simplicity to use the same “hot spots” from our virtual tour as the points of interest on the walking tour. We made some way-finding signs as well as placards for each of those 15 spots on campus, and in fairly short order, we had the backbone of our weekend “Self Guided Family Tours.”

Next, an artistic parent volunteer overlaid a walking path onto a handout of our campus map, utilizing the same watercolor rendering used on our virtual tour home page. This same volunteer also created a beautiful hand-drawn scavenger hunt with a few landmarks on campus. This provided kids with a fun way to interact with our campus since the playgrounds needed to be closed and roped off.

One of our admission team members had the brilliant idea of linking the virtual tour with the 15 spots on campus via a QR code, which we provided on the back of the campus map handed out on the day of the visit. This innovation allowed visitors to follow along the path and view the virtual tour on their phones.

In terms of logistics, one of our admission team members greeted families as they arrived and made sure they had completed a self-health screening. We also scheduled a few parent volunteers to stand outside of certain strategic spots and make sure people were on the right path. They were also available to answer questions and chat, which was a novelty during a virtual admission season. We staggered families by 10-minute increments and required masks. We held these events over the course of 12 Saturdays throughout admission season.

After we sent admission acceptances, we scheduled one last self-guided family tour. For this tour, we invited even more parent volunteers, opened up a few key spaces on campus, and had our Head of School greet families. These events were amazing experiences that we were so grateful we could work out during this seemingly all-virtual season.

Our team plans to continue offering similar tours on weekends throughout the 2021–2022 school year. Why continue? Because it allows entire families (including grandparents if desired) to visit together. Adults in a family can see, firsthand, as children connect with our campus and even “sell” the experience to their parents/guardians as they do things like run on our field and count our chickens. Weekend events also allow a broader range of families to visit as opposed to navigating around workweek scheduling hurdles.

All in all, we are more than happy that what began as an innovative workaround for a challenging time will continue to serve us as we introduce families to our beautiful campus. +
Our admission team did amazing work to yield our accepted students right out of the gate on March 10. After we sent our 2021 acceptance video, these additional yield steps followed:

- Each admission officer recorded a personalized video for each student we interviewed and accepted. These videos included a mention of a personal interest for the student and were delivered via email.

- Our Board of Trustees and young alums were engaged and assigned accepted families to contact. Current students were assigned accepted students to contact.

- We offered a series of Zoom events segmenting our newly accepted students by boarding, day, in-state, out-of-state, and international.

- Our next yield event was exciting because we were finally able to invite accepted families on campus for outdoor campus tours. Families had the opportunity to meet (socially distanced) with coaches, students, and faculty members.

- The subsequent events were Academic "Office Hours," allowing families to do a deep dive into the department about which they were most interested in learning more.

- In preparation for our Q & A session for our Virtual Revisit Day, we sent accepted families a survey that provided them with the opportunity to express their most pressing questions and concerns. We organized their responses by theme and created an FAQ page on our Revisit Hub for accepted families to access. We responded to more personal or individual questions via email or a personal phone call to the family.

All of this pre-planning helped us develop programming for virtual revisit day that was not only a great deal of fun but also included our entire St. Mark’s community, including students, faculty, parents, and alums.
There are a number of idioms and cliches that can be apropos when discussing enrollment, but there are none more precise than this as we continue to navigate the pandemic and its impact. Retaining enrolled families has always been a priority. However, given the uncertainty regarding how the pandemic may continue to impact future recruitment, retaining students is certainly a more manageable task than sustaining the virtual, contactless recruiting strategies we’ve all needed to employ over the last 17 months.

At St. Andrew’s School, we pride ourselves on the intimacy of relationships that exist between members of our community. Being that we are a small school, connectedness is a hallmark of the SAS experience. Our approach to retention is collaborative, proactive, and intentional. Taking a student’s or family’s loyalty for granted once enrolled is often the first misstep causing things to go awry. Especially in this day and age where the value proposition is rooted in customization, and alternative options abound, engagement and sustained recruitment of enrolled families is paramount.

Our retention practices include:

A FORMAL RETENTION COMMITTEE
If schools do not have a formal retention committee, that is a great place to start. As the chair of my school’s committee, gaining perspective from colleagues regarding the student experience is my foremost priority. Other committee members include the head of school, director of student life, assistant head for academics (who is also our director of middle school), director of college counseling, dean of residential life, two faculty members, and our assistant director of academic programming.

ADMINISTERING CLIMATE SURVEYS
Devising retention strategies and individualized plans for student support relies heavily on data. Administering consistent climate surveys has helped us stay apprised of how our students are feeling. In the case of retention, what better source of data than feedback from the students you’re aiming to serve? In addition to surveys, we also leverage our colleagues’ connections with students through their roles as teachers, advisors, coaches, dorm parents, etc. Feedback from these individuals provides great insight into what needs aren’t being met. Only then can a strategic approach be identified and executed.

PRESERVING CULTURE
While community building and proactive retention strategies have been a bit more difficult this past year with a distributed faculty and student body, we have managed to preserve practices that bring our community together. Some examples of how we’ve done this include running virtual morning meetings two times a week to ensure everyone spends time together whether in person or accessing the community remotely, hosting virtual activities such as lip sync battles and trivia nights to create shared social experiences, and offering virtual breakfast clubs where members of our community can engage in meaningful conversations over a meal as they are accustomed to doing on campus. While the examples shared aren’t specific to retention, it has helped us preserve culture. As a result, students continue to be engaged and connected despite the limitations brought on by the pandemic.

MAKING IT PERSONAL
Making an effort to meet students where they are is necessary when considering retention. A one size fits all approach is antiquated and leads to students feeling misunderstood and unsupported. While issues will arise and challenges will emerge, a genuine willingness to support students through any difficulty goes a long way. Reminding students of why they enrolled and how they’ve benefited is an easier “sell” than convincing a prospective student and family that your community is the best fit. Set expectations, communicate, solicit feedback, be proactive in meeting student needs, and do what you say you’re going to do. Ultimately, students and families want to know they’re valued.

“A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.”

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