

# Strategic Communication: Identify The Communication Preferences Of Potential Students

**Bella Margarian**

Cambridge College  
500 Rutherford Ave  
Boston, MA 02138, US

**Abstract—** Every educational institution relies on communication to share important information with prospective and current students. Many institutions struggling with communication challenges. While the concept of communication could be primitive, but effective communication is critical and challenging. This manuscript addresses communication challenges and discusses methods and strategies that need to be considered to overcome them by referencing the inquiry from the prospective students.

**Keywords—**Higher education; communication; strategy; prospective students; enrollment;

The space is noisy, and breaking through and reaching prospective students is a multifaceted challenge.

Higher education institutions must choose the right time, method, and medium to reach students. Students are everywhere, and institutions need a way to reach them where they are when they are needed, especially with critical or time-sensitive issues. To reach to students need to meet them on their terms.

This manuscript highlights effective methods of communication and strategizes the communication with potential students using a survey taken from 3458 students in the Greater Boston area.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Student recruitment can be a lengthy process, often taking months or even years for students to move from stages of initial enquiry to application to registered student. The first inquire from a prospective student is just for gathering information and probably comparing schools and programs, rather than actively asking specific questions or making decisions. Between the inquiry to application, there may be a prolonged period of time before the prospective student is ready to take action. Without a proper strategy for managing and nurturing inquiries and leads between stages [1] any progress made can easily fall apart. Having a proper communications strategy for various stages of initial student's journey and plan when and what to communicate with students would have changing and lasting positive consequences.

In other side, these days, the world is overloaded with information. Everyone has several devices that they use for communication. Capturing students's attention is not an easy task, and it's challenging. For higher education institutions, the case gets even more complex. Students receive communications from friends, family, jobs, and social media. Each person could receive hundreds of communication links a day.

## II. COMMUNICATION METHODS

Since students are everywhere, you need to be ready to reach them where they are and when required, especially when essential and time-sensitive messages need to be transferred. One communication channel is insufficient and would not lead to effective communication to reach prospective students. Schools need multichannel communication, which allows them to connect with prospective students wherever they are in the most effective and convenient way. Multichannel communications should include:

-Email

-Text message (SMS, imessage, wechat, whatsapp, massanger, tiktok, etc)

-Social media communication (X, instagram, facebook,...)

-Phone calls & voicemails

-Direct mail

-Web chat

#### A. Email

Email remains one of the most effective and preferred ways of communication. It is one of the best tools for effective marketing and retention of students. Cutting-edge email campaigns with proper layouts and information on email institutions could increase the prospect's likelihood of reading the message and increase the level of interest.

#### B. Text Messages

According to a recent market research highlighting studies, over 90% of texts are read in the first five minutes and have a 98% open rate. This drastically outmatches any other communication medium. Texting prospective students ensures they see time-sensitive information like open houses and reminders of deadlines and have valuable resources at their fingertips. Schools could provide any link that leads to a mobile responsive page to complete any action prospective students should be able to do on their mobile devices easily. This could establish a stronger relationship with prospective students. It may save at-risk students from permanently drifting off course.

#### C. Social Media Participation

To increase the likelihood of prospective students applying to a particular educational institution, it is essential to engage them in meaningful ways. One effective strategy is to create a social buzz around the school, encouraging potential students to meet like-minded individuals and form meaningful connections. By doing so, educational institutions can influence student decisions and strengthen their reputation. It is important to recognize that social engagement is a crucial element in the recruitment process and can help schools attract the best and brightest students. Therefore, it is recommended that educational institutions develop effective social strategies that are planned to the needs and interests of their prospective students in order to maximize their chances of success.

#### D. Communication on the phone

Phones are an opportunity to ask questions and get answers on the spot and urgently, but it can be scary for students. Once the application process has begun, phone calls could become an essential means of communication.

#### E. Direct mail

Direct mail can be an effective marketing modality for sending marketing materials like viewbooks, brochures, or event invitations.

#### F. Web chats

More and more institutions are incorporating live web chat functions on their websites. Whether it's a chatbot, a live representative, or a combination of both, it's a way to provide immediate and convenient to engage with potential students.

### III. ANALYTICAL METHODS

For the context of this manuscript and examining the prospective students' preferences and feedback regarding methods of communication, 3458 students have been questioned. All students planned to attend private universities for undergraduate or graduate studies in the greater Boston area during the academic years of 2022-2024. The responses to the questions were categorized by undergraduate and graduate age groups of traditional students who could have a job (part-time or full-time) but are not entirely responsible for the financial well-being of their own families and have financial support and adult learners who have full-time or several part-time jobs and are accountable for their family resources.

*Research question 1:* The best way to start to communicate with you is through:

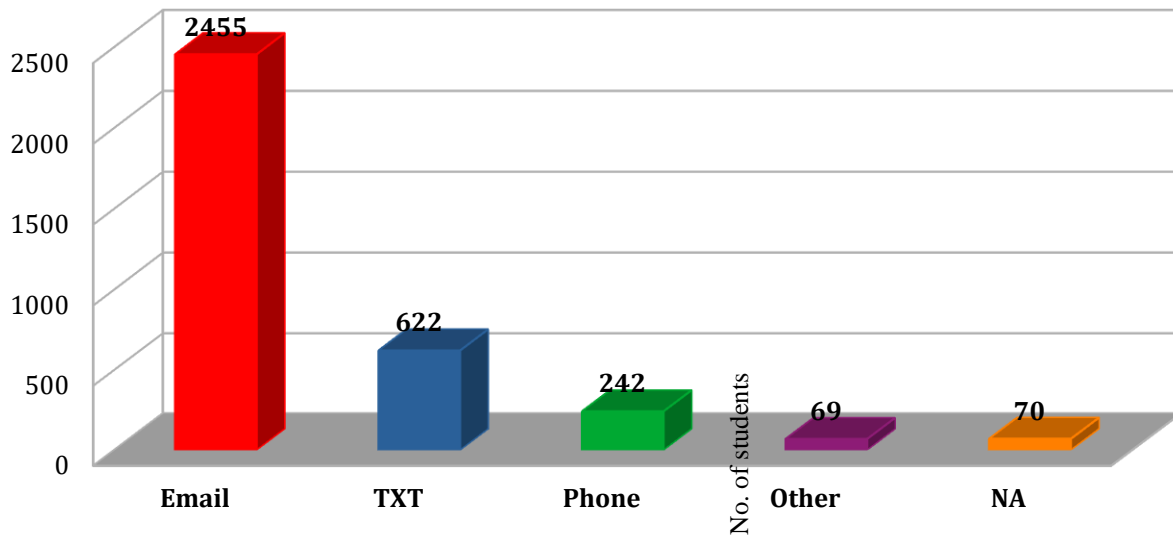
(Rank 1-5, with 1 being the most effective and 5 the least effective way of communicating)

Email  
SMS  
Social Media  
Phone call  
Printed mail  
Web chat

Of the 3,458 potential students, 69 opted not to respond to a question posed in a survey, representing roughly 2% of the sample. Findings from the survey show that a significant proportion of students, astonishing 71% of the total, 2,455 respondents, expressed a preference for communication via email. The second most preferred mode of communication was texting and SMS, with about 18% or 622 respondents indicating a preference for this option. The potential students favored the texting since it is

convenient, fast and flexible. According to Connect Mogul a data analyzing source 90% of all text messages are read in under 3 minutes and the average is less than 5 seconds. Phone conversation was the third most preferred method of communication, with only 7%, or 242 students,

selecting this option. Finally, a small proportion of students, roughly 2% of the total sample, preferred communication through social media and web chat, which were categorized as 'other' in the survey. These results shown in chart 1 below.



**Chart 1;** data showing results of the prospective students answers to the questions No 1.

*Research question 2:* You are interested in receiving information about the college events including registration, financial aid, admissions events, and other college events through:

- Email
- SMS
- Social Media
- Phone call
- Printed mail

According to inquiry, out of a pool of 3458 potential students, a significant proportion of them, 2598 ( about 75%), have expressed a preference for email as their primary mode of communication and follow up. Approximately 17% of respondents, or 598 students, would prefer text and SMS messaging as their primary mode of communication. Only 6% of potential students, or 209, favored phone conversation, while a mere 2% preferred alternative forms of communication such as chat and social media, as illustrated in Chart 2.

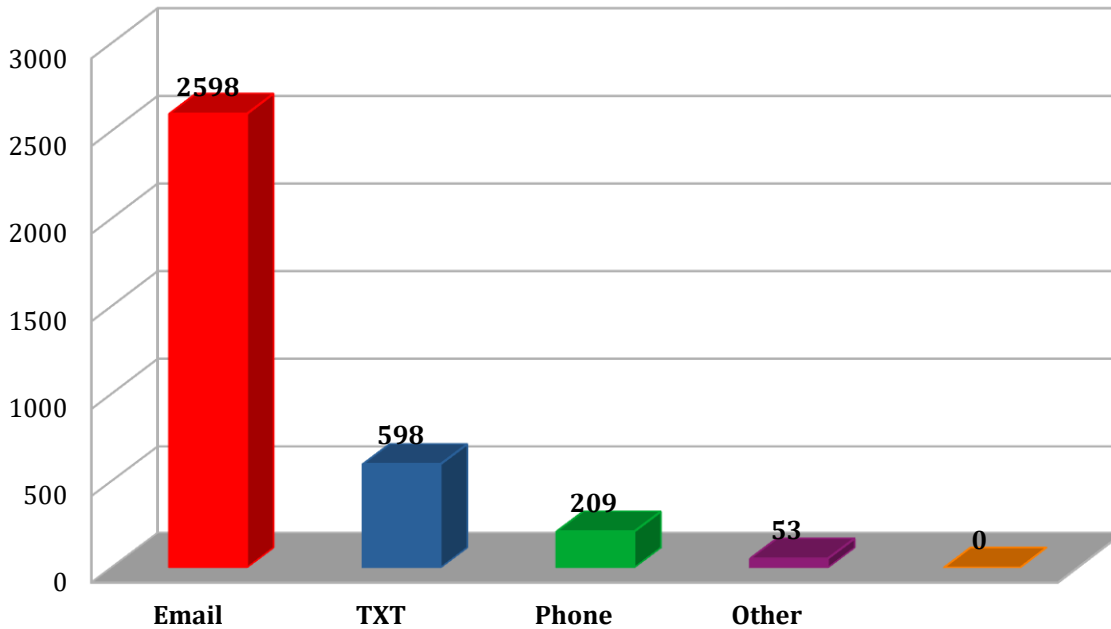
Prospective students have cited convenience as the primary reason for their preference for email and text communication. They appreciate the ability to respond at their leisure, take their time without feeling rushed, and have a documented record of all communication that they can review as needed. Conversely, phone communication is perceived as inconvenient, stressful, and possible lacking in factual basis and documentation.

Overall, these findings highlight the importance of academic institutions providing multiple modes of communication to meet the diverse preferences and needs of their stakeholders. By doing so, they can enhance the quality and effectiveness of their communication and build stronger relationships with their constituents.

#### IV. COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

The traditional methods of communication mentioned above are no longer effective unless they strategize. Schools need to renovate their communication strategies to influence prospective students and attract their attention with actions. While students want to get the information they need and understand colleges' requirements and offerings, they don't want

to be disturbed and their inboxes afloat with communication. An effective communication process should consider any possible scenarios that can occur during the student journey, with built-in contingencies to cover communications over an extended period. Here are several strategies that need to be considered to have an effective and continuous campaign:



**Chart 2;** data showing results of the prospective students answers to the questions 2.

##### A. Create a communication plan to ensure prompt and consistent engagement

A good communication plan could help launch a successful initiative. It's also crucial to maintain control as communication becomes easier and more pervasive. It's important for schools to get ahead of students soon after they opt-in. It's affectional to fill out an application or inquire form for school. This emotion will wane fast and over time. Schools must reach out quickly and engage in several communication methods that map out emails, texts, phone calls, mail, and other engagements. Any unanswered communication from students or to students without follow-up is a missed opportunity.

##### B. Staying Relevant and precise

The volume of messages students receive can be overwhelming. Communication could be ignored or opted out if schools do not have a personalized and focused communication strategy. Messages should be relevant. While over-communicating could desensitize prospective students such that they could ignore

messages altogether, under-communicating would make it hard for messages to stay relevant. Poor and ineffective communications would result in missing important information, causing significant ramifications between students and institutions like missing deadlines for course registration, payments, etc.... Therefore, balancing the act with sending important messages, targeted follow-ups, and personalized communications is crucial.

Prospective students are hungry for information. When determining how to attract students, it's important to share relevant information during the inquiry, application, and enrollment process. While reaching out to students, the given information should be adequate. Send them brochures or view books, invitations to events such as open houses or informational webinars, etc.

Make requirements as straightforward as possible and ensure students know exactly what they need to do and how to do it. Once a student has enrolled, there's a lot of information to share, including:

- Tuition payment instructions
- Health form requirements
- Class registration
- International student information

### C. Being Persistence

The best way to turn an enquiry into an application then registered student is to treat it at the beginning of a conversation rather than merely a question to be answered later. Include questions, try to encourage interaction, and always follow up. A common concern regarding student leads is that they are not interested if they do not respond back. This is not always the case. It is quite normal not to receive a response back to the first contact for an extended time. The communication environment is noisy, and people are inundated with messages all day. Breaking through the communication noise is challenging.

If a prospective student does not respond after the first or second communication, send a follow-up email or other communication modalities within a few days. The probability of reaching the recipients increases by attempting to contact them more frequently on different platforms.

Persistence could resemble pushy or overbearing. Persistence should be balancing the right time and the right amount of information and contacts to guide the prospective student to a desired action: completing the application and moving to the next stage. If there is information that will benefit students, don't stop and don't let a lack of response halt from contacting them; persistence will pay off, and they will appreciate it later.

### D. Keep It concise and digestible

The average attention of students is 8 seconds. That's not a lot of time to capture students' attention, even if the content is essential and exciting. These days, students receive a massive amount of content that they need to "filter." If the message is text-heavy, students will fatigue and will get lost. Therefore, it's essential to keep the communication to the point and short. Shorter messages have a greater likelihood of being read and retained. Bullet points are the best.

### E. Make it Visual

Creating visually compelling content is another strategy to implement. Daily, students spend 3-5

hours on social media (Instagram, Facebook, X, TikTok, YouTube, etc.) and consume visual content. Integrating GIFs, images, or clips or directing traffic to the source of related visual content like campus tours, etc., would improve the chances of students' engagement. Of course, the visual aspect of the communication is not limited only to images and video clips. The text presentation also counts as a visual factor. Using bold, italics fonts or bullet points for the most critical part of the message could increase engagement. Usually, students quickly skim messages before deciding whether or not to read them. Using visual formatting to draw eyes to what is essential in the message is a good strategy.

### F. Make a Connection with establishing a welcoming tone

A personalized communication approach is key to not overwhelming students and keeping their engagement. Just like one shouldn't send every message over every channel, it shouldn't send every message to every student. Authenticity and personalization when engaging with brands and colleges are valuable. Avoid one-size-fits-all and personalize the communication by tailoring it to student interests, like the major, the semester they intend to start the school or other relevant topics. Sending "blast" messages signals to the student that the messages likely are irrelevant or in priority, so there's no need to pay attention." **If it's not personalized, it doesn't matter."**

Communication should not be transactional, and it needs to be engaging and impactful to build a relationship, focus on the student perspective, be student-centered, and possibly with a casual and friendly tone. An inviting, comfortable, and engaging tone would make students more comfortable asking questions and concerns while emphasizing why it's essential to continue reading the message. Avoiding words that are more academic and not typical for everyone, like accreditation, matriculation, etc is good approach as well.

### G. Be Selective

While being multichannel is essential, that doesn't mean you should send the same message over every platform. The plan is not to desensitize students. Sending too many messages over all possible



channels will inevitably lead to burnout, where students no longer pay attention to anything anymore. Highly visible channels, like SMS messages, should be for the most critical and time-sensitive content. Everything else must be sent via passive channels like email. Everyone thinks their message is a high priority. However, being selective is key to keeping students engaged with communications.

#### H. Make Information Easy to Find

The trouble with multichannel communication is that it can be hard to find the messages and information. The existence of a singular, integrated platform for students to receive various types of messages proves to be a valuable resource, as it enables them to revisit past messages without the need to recall their source. The conveyance of passive information is just as significant as active communication. In this regard, digital platforms featuring comprehensive search functionality prove to be indispensable, as students tend to seek pertinent information and answers through search before making a direct inquiry.

#### I. Time: The most efficient communication factor

While one size does not fit all, time and methods do not too. For higher education institutions, the slogan is; "timing, timing, timing." Students are everywhere. To grab their attention and engage them, institutions need to be everywhere at the time that they are available.

Thinking ahead about important dates and deadlines to allow enough time to send reminders and multiple forms of communication is important. Be sure to consider the availability of audiences to read the messages. Plan thoroughly, anticipate when the potential students need specific information, and deliver accordingly.

#### J. Continue Communicating After Admission

Most students apply to several institutions and are even admitted to other schools. In this case, if the student felt welcomed and comfortable with the journey up to this point as they weigh up their decisions, while elevating the institution to the top of their mind and could tilt this way or another. Therefore, since the first step, if they felt valued and in relationship with the given institution and employees

and did not feel alienated or isolated, then they would make their proper choices.

Developing a dynamic, detail-oriented post-acceptance communications plan that reinforces the admitted students' desire to attend university is important. The communication at this stage should include messages that outline the student's next steps so that they don't become confused or overwhelmed throughout the enrollment process.

#### K. Multichannel sequencing

When it comes to reaching out to prospective students, it's essential to have a strategic plan in place. While many different methods are available, a multichannel approach with planned sequencing has proven to be the most efficient and effective. To begin, it's recommended to send a brief introduction of the school, its programs, departments, and application requirements via email. This email serves as a starting point, providing the student with essential information and setting the foundation for future communication. Following the email introduction, the next step is to send an SMS/text message introducing oneself as a representative of the institution. This message should offer help with reminding the student about the emails just sent, provide general information and paperwork, and offer the option to talk on the phone or virtual platforms like Skype, Zoom, etc. By this point, the student has received enough information to analyze and decide if they want to move forward in the process. They also have the option of reaching out to the representative for further help with choices of communication.

After the second communication, calling via phone would be another good step. The process can be repeated as needed until a response is received or the student decides not to move forward. By sequencing the follow-up methods in this way, it ensures that the prospective student receives the necessary information and support while also respecting their time and preferences for communication.

#### Conclusion

Institution of higher education are competing to get their messages across in a very noisy environment. Communication is the life blood of any institution. Effective communication can be elusive and requires a nuanced, thoughtful approach. This is the light which institutions should not lose sight of and they should leverage the most advanced and responsive communications strategies. Communication is not only clicking the "send" button but there are much more behind the scenes.

While communication is always a challenging task, but meanwhile there are witting steps institutions can take to improve the chances of results. Successful communication requires a modern approach and commitment system wide with high standards and strategies.

Not all methods of communication are equivalent. Email is the most commonly used method, SMS is good for transferring fast information like reminders, invitations, and announcements. Direct mail is for sending marketing materials like viewbooks and brochures, phone is a fast, direct communication tool with its hurdles, but could be also powerful. All in all, variety is the spice of life. Figuring out how to effectively communicate with prospects and newly admitted students is imperative. Utilizing some or all of the tips and techniques outlined in this manuscript would ensure ability to optimize enrollment and retention rates. The most obvious factor of future recruitment success is student engagement. Implementing proactive lead nurturing strategies to retain prospective students engagement, evolve to applicant and registered student should be the main focus[1].

**References:**

[1]. Margarian, B. (2022). Admissions and Retention: New Challenges for Higher Education. International Journal of Education and Social Science, 9(3).