SEO FOR STUDENT ENROLLMENT

Putting Your School on Top

OHO INTERACTIVE

SEO is a Channel Strategy, Not a Channel

Often, SEO is misunderstood as a channel that can be funded in the same way a paid search or digital media campaign might be. And while the leads that come through organic search are just as valuable (dare we say, more valuable?) than those that are purchased through a controlled spend for pay-per-click advertising or landing page form captures, there is no control that allows you to influence the velocity through which you are capturing leads from organic searchers.

The reality is that SEO is not a channel that can be directly funded. Rather, "doing more SEO" is really a series of business decisions designed to grow, sculpt, or otherwise influence your organic traffic. These business decisions typically mean the allocation of resources into things like content, copywriters, developers, server infrastrastructure, and agency partners or consultants — which requires buy-in from multiple groups across the organization. As a result, you're going to have to be prepared to communicate the value of your SEO strategy to many different audiences with many different measures of success.

Communicate SEO Value in the Univer$al £anguag€

The challenge that many SEO consultants have in meeting these different audiences is a common language. Perceptions of SEO — and consultants that specialize in the field — have evolved in recent years. While SEO was once a nebulous and misunderstood undertaking, nearly all brands now recognize the importance of their organic traffic, and SEO consultants are now commonplace at professional marketing organizations. The SEO expert is now a widely valued member of the larger digital and brand marketing team.

The problem is, that while marketing organizations have integrated SEO best practices and strategies into their digital operations, they haven't bothered to change the language to communicate the value of SEO investments. The words "domain authority" don't resonate in the boardroom. Budget allocations are never justified for "link bait." New hire and staffing decisions have never been made as a means to flow more "link juice." Too often, we're missing the opportunity to communicate the value in a commonly understood metric. In this case, money.

How to Advocate for SEO

Of course, this requires at least a predictive level of downstream understanding of the ROI of your SEO investments. The decision-makers on campus rarely care about traffic as an end goal. Rather, what does that traffic mean in terms of enrolled students? Traffic is cool, rankings are cool, but when does that start to impact the bottom line? Here are a few examples of what to say/not to say:

LESS OF THIS:

" *We need to hire writers for a content marketing blitz designed to dominate the rankings for our PPC keywords."*

" *We need to move to a cloud platform-as-a-service provider to increase our website speed scores."*

MORE OF THIS:

" *If we were able to obtain organic traffic for keywords related to this topic, this could save us $10k in ad spend each month. Creating content that could attract that traffic would represent a one-time upfront investment of $15k. I'm sure you would agree this would be a sound investment."*

" *We know that students from India and China represent a significant enrollment growth area for the institution. By transitioning off our older server infrastructure, our website will be better able to deliver brand awareness, website traffic, and leads internationally."*

In both these scenarios, there is a level of context to the conversation that is broader than traditional SEO metrics. Like all budgetary appeals, this context is critical in higher education SEO investment discussions.

The Built-In .edu Advantage

SEO success tends to be more serendipitous in higher education than other industries. This may be fortuitous, but is not by coincidence or search engine error.

A quick examination of your institution's top organic landing pages will likely contain some surprises. That's because websites in the .edu domain are like SEO Ferraris running on premium fuel. They have so much backlink equity built up in them from thought leadership, academic scholarship, and inherent brand trust that when content is posted on these domains, it tends to rank very well with very little effort and, often, not even by design.

That's why it's not uncommon to see blog posts, news stories, or even job listings ranking in the first three organic search results for competitive keywords. Cross-referencing any oddities you find in your top organic landing pages with your keyword referral data in Google Search Console will often surface those keywords that are driving this mysterious traffic.

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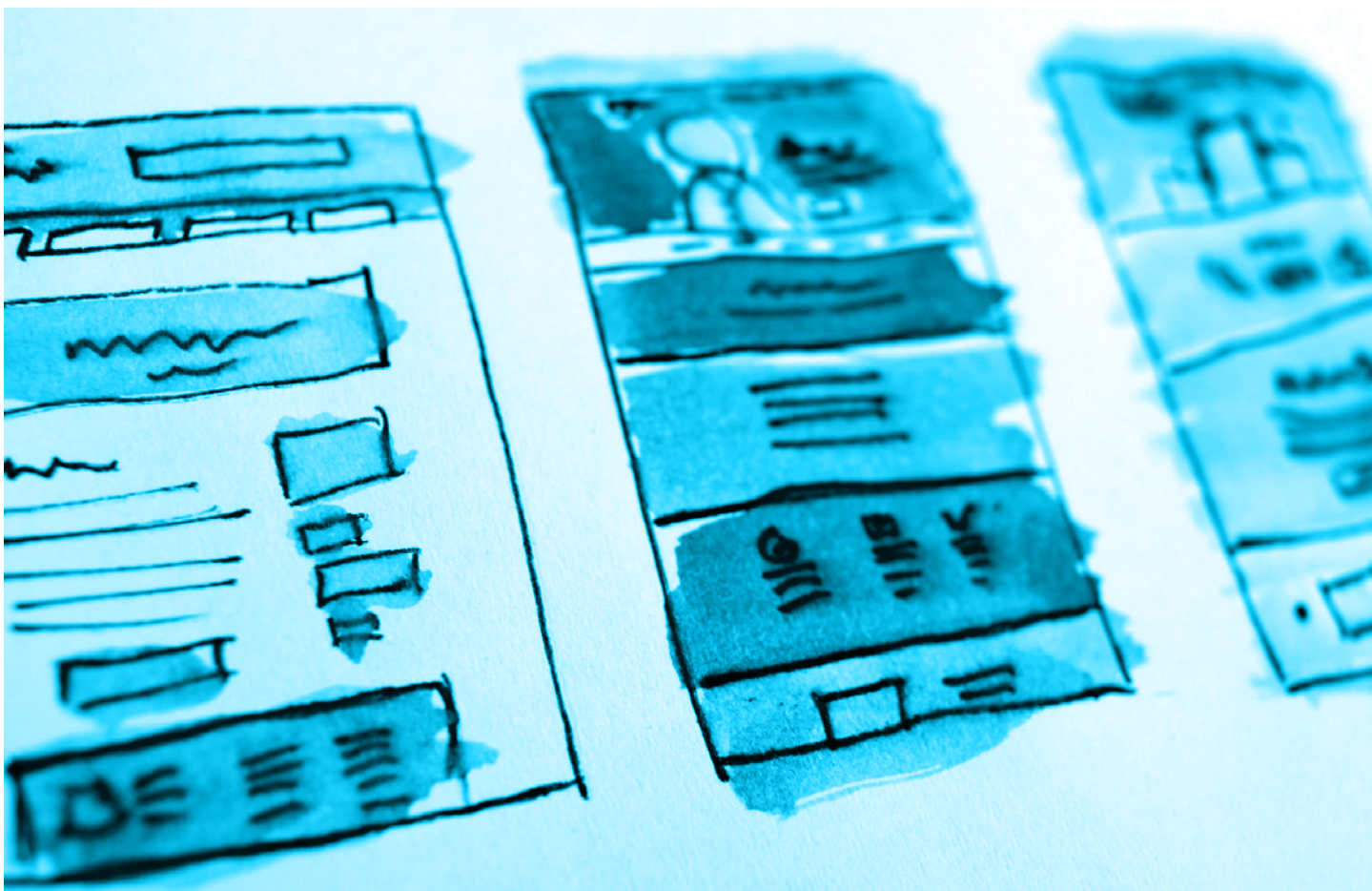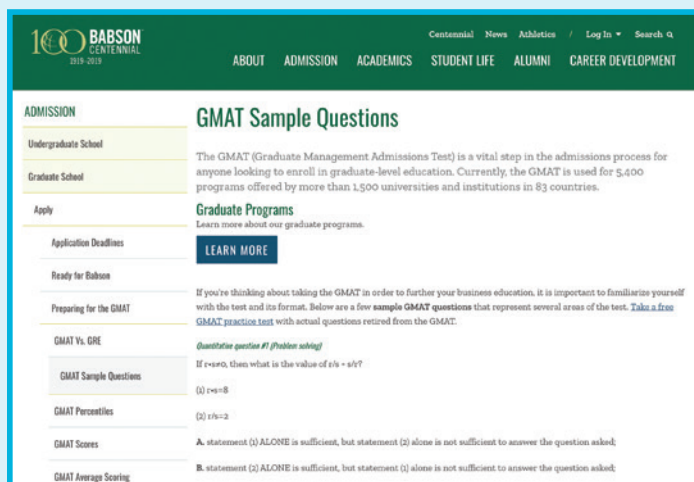
Layer in Some Intentionality to Your Content

Doing the basics of customizing your metadata, eliminating your broken links, and other table-stakes SEO work will only bring you so far. With the understanding that the marketplace demand for your degrees, programs, or other educational products is somewhat static, it's imperative you find ways to grow your ability to impact potential prospects.

That's where introducing some level of intentionality into your content planning comes into your SEO game plan. Now, we've already addressed how you can justify the resources you need to create content, so now we have to determine the types of content you want to create to help you reach your audience. This is where you have to be creative in identifying the meeting points between the interests of your potential prospects and your institution's brand identity.

Successful Content Marketing Strategy Examples

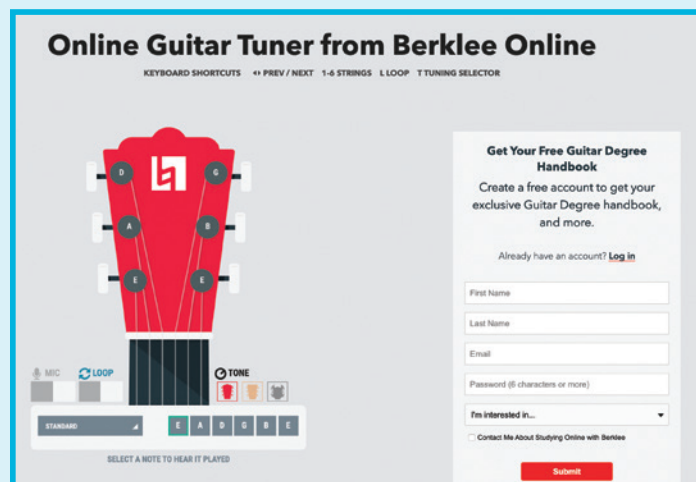https://www.babson.edu/admission/graduate-school/apply/preparing-for-the-gmat/gmat-sample-questions/

https://online.berklee.edu/guitar-tuner

Babson College leveraged a partnership with The Economist in which they published a handful of GMAT sample questions, including a presence on their primary domain that was eligible to rank in organic search results. Despite being several years old at this point, their landing page still ranks on page one of Google's search results for the competitive phrases like "gmat sample questions."

From afar, this appears successful not only for its ability to drive pure traffic, but the intent of those searching for GMAT test questions screams of that of someone directly in the recruitment funnel for a business school. Nearly all of the users who reached this page via organic search could logically be considered qualified leads. Pages like this represent an excellent opportunity to cross-merchandise your related educational programs or products.

Expanding our notion of what we might traditionally think of as "content," the **Berklee College of Music** invested in building an online guitar tuner, reinforcing the idea that tools or experiences can be even more memorable than traditional content mediums.
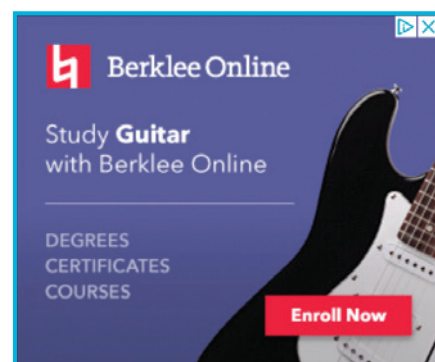
This strategy was similarly aligned with a business initiative for the institution as they launched this tool in concert with a new, fully-online guitar degree program. Despite having fallen off recently, their tool ranked on the first page of search results for terms like "online guitar tuner." Though traffic to this page may have been accessed with a wider cross-section of user intent, it was still close enough to the brand's identity to create valuable experiences.

Working even higher up in the funnel, it was interesting to find a blog post from the **University of San Diego** ranking on the first page of search results for "cybersecurity threats". Given the B2B competition for traffic for similar phrases, this is a clear example of the power of a .edu domain being leveraged to garner tangentially-qualified traffic.

https://onlinedegrees.sandiego.edu/top-cyber-security-threats/

Lifting All Boats

The fun doesn't stop there! Rankings and traffic can be fleeting, but well-executed content marketing tactics can continue to add value even after the initial surge of traffic fades. In fact, organic traffic, when curated properly, tends to be a boon to ongoing digital media campaigns.

In a digital display media landscape with inflated impression-to-click ratios, and few qualified leads, organic search landing pages like the previous examples represent an incredible opportunity to place your institution's retargeting pixels on the browsers of a pool of users whose intent is implied simply from their consumption of the content.

Here you'll see Berklee inferring an interest in guitar because the user visited their tuner page, and serving them with targeted guitar-related creative in Facebook retargeting ads.

Aligning the content and messaging of your display advertising with these intentions allows you to introduce an additional level of sophistication and quality to your campaigns. These audiences are smaller, but they are also more focused and qualified pools, allowing your institution to continue to gain exposure long after the initial interaction with your content.

Crossing the River

Digital marketers are notoriously siloed when defining the success metrics of their discipline. There is always an inherent handoff between those generating impressions, garnering clicks, prompting conversions, and making sales, but at a holistic level we're all beholden to creating elegant and cohesive web experiences. SEO efforts are a critical consideration for any integrated digital team.

The student consumer journey is long and nuanced, but success is generally well-defined. If we think of our customer's journey as successfully navigating a boat across a river, there will always be a time where we need to fuel up the engines and point our motors against the current to reach the other side. But the magic of a well-executed SEO strategy reveals itself in earnest upon catching the wind in our sails.

Top 6 things you can do right now to boost SEO

1 **Set up a 404 report using Google Analytics or a tool such as Siteimprove to identify any broken links.**

Broken links won't just impact your organic search strength, but broken URLs are just horrible for users. Regularly monitoring attempted pageviews of broken links will allow you to quickly set up redirects and prevent this interrupted user pathway.

2 **Review the Google college search feature and update your Google business profile.**

You have limited control over what data appears in the college search feature, as it is primarily based on official reported data from the last few years and scraping publications and other "official" sources, but the more accurate your business profile (which appears through other Google properties like Google Maps), the better.

3 **Research top landing pages from organic search.**

Since Google does not report organic keywords, you can see which landing pages your audience tends to visit from organic search. These pages will tell you which pages your users tend to search for, and also which pages have very strong search value. And these results may surprise you!

Landing Page ?
1. /blog/explained-60-seconds-hash-symbols-urls-and-seo
2. /blog/10-best-capital-campaign-websites-universities-and-colleges
3. /blog/6-alumni-websites-so-great-you-ll-want-copy-them
4. /blog/5-must-attend-conferences-higher-education-marketers-2018
5. /
6. /blog/marketing-and-recruiting-adult-learners-and-non-traditional-students

Search Term ?
1. Tuition
2. Academic calendar
3. employment
4. jobs
5. careers
6. human resources
7. tuition

4 **Use the Google Analytics Site Search report and Landing Pages from Organic Search to provide insight into what your website visitors are looking for.**

Google reports a dismal number of organic search keywords to your site within Google Analytics or the Search Console. We recommend you use your internal site search results to give you an idea of what your website visitors are looking for, and use this data to inform content and architecture decisions.

5 **Review and update your Wikipedia page.**

Wikipedia is now an "official" source of content, as millions of users flock to Wikipedia for information and statistics. The link to your university's Wikipedia page appears at the top of organic search results *and* is a source of content for the Google college search feature. Good news is that you can contribute to this content and correct any inaccurate data on this page. But keep it factual — no marketing speak allowed!

6 **Optimize your media content — videos and photos.**

Outside of Google search, YouTube is the second most popular search engine. You know that video is an important vehicle to communicate brand messaging to your audiences, but consider how it can help answer your users' questions and provide more depth to their search queries.

❑ **Use search-friendly titles** for your videos.

❑ **Apply user-centric keywords** to the tags and video description.

❑ **Amp up your accessibility: add subtitles and closed captions to your video**, as well as transcribe the video in the video description.

The same goes for photos — consider how the metadata of public images can contribute positively to search results, and meet the needs of your audiences!

ABOUT OHO INTERACTIVE

OHO Interactive is a Boston-based agency with 20 years of experience delivering award-winning strategy, design, and web development solutions. With more than 75 education clients on its roster, OHO Interactive offers experience, expertise, and knowledge that few other consultancies can match. Our firm provides the full spectrum of interactive services with a focus on helping our clients create exceptional experiences, build strong relationships, and generate top-line growth with their digital strategy.

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