



Sixth Form Colleges
Association

THE VOICE OF SIXTH FORM EDUCATION

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COMMUNICATIONS, MARKETING & STUDENT RECRUITMENT

WHAT DOES YOUR MARKETING STRATEGY LOOK LIKE
DURING AND BEYOND COVID-19'S SECTOR-CHANGING GRIP?



TOP TIPS

- Keep communicating
- Be creative
- Include all stakeholders
- Get external help if needed
- Act now
- College-wide approach

As we approach a critical time for student recruitment and marketing campaigns, it is vital that all colleges review their plans, develop creative approaches and take the opportunities that present themselves during these uncharted times. There are, of course, the current students who will hopefully return to college to consider, as well as prospective students who will progress to college in September and those who will be completing their studies. They each have different needs, and present different risks and opportunities.

Many colleges will have passed their deadline dates for applications and should have most prospective student data; however, colleges will be considering how to encourage late applicants from those who remain undecided about their destinations at 16. How can we re-assure students that the lack of GCSE exams doesn't mean that they cannot go to college and how can we ensure that strategies to keep warm those students who have submitted applications remain effective? There are lots of creative ways that we can not only continue with our plans, but make them more exciting, real and personable. One thing is for sure, waiting until 'normality' resumes might be too late and could have significant implications for your summer recruitment.

It is all of these actions and more that will protect the work done so far and support recruitment targets for September.

CURRENT STUDENTS

Whilst second year students won't be sitting exams this summer, they will still be keen to complete their studies. The majority of students will appreciate the hard work of their teachers and will keep studying in the summer term. For most, on-line classes, workshops, lectures and tests continue. But these students will be missing out on many other services that they get at the college. These include careers advice, counselling, enrichment activities and being involved in the college community. Colleges will know those students who are receiving special support and have mental health issues and how they can further try and work with these students at this time.

All parts of the college are important and as far as possible should continue to be available to students. For many, the wrap-around support that they receive is just as important as the formal lessons. So how can you still actively work with your students?

HERE ARE SOME IDEAS...

KEEP IN TOUCH

Keep in touch with your current students. Besides the contact with teaching staff, there are lots of ways you can keep students connected to the college. Send regular newsletters including all aspects of college life.

The Careers team can provide information coming from universities, many of whom have virtual tours. The Team can offer live Q&A sessions and on-line chats to those who have specific needs and worries about their A-Level grades and how they will impact their university place. The in-house catering team can provide healthy and fun recipes, they could encourage students to make a specific item, post their photo on social media and select a winner. The Estates team can get involved by sharing a photo of the college grounds as spring transforms the grounds and the Sports team can share some keep-fit activities.

Social media can be used to share information, provide fun content and encourage engagement with students. Don't overuse it, use it carefully. Ensure that someone is able to reply if there are any questions. You don't want to post too much or you risk losing followers.

Parents will be as concerned as students. Send a formal letter home to students and their parents to advise them on key information. This might include how universities will manage their grades and the impact on the entry requirements, how end of year celebrations will be managed and how students will continue to get on-going support from the college. Send updates too, one letter in several weeks might not feel like enough for many concerned students and parents.

Producing short videos is fun and effective. A brief hello and update from the principal, the receptionist or tutors is a great way to provide some key messages, advise what is happening in the college or just to simply say hello.

PLAN CELEBRATIONS

Many students will feel that they will miss out on end of year celebrations. These may include award evenings, art exhibitions, performances and parties.

Some of these can continue. Consider the SFCA on-line art exhibition, with its focus on what life is like at home this summer, or the annual sixth form college awards, with its Awards Ceremony on 18th June. Performances cannot continue, but past performances could be showcased in a retrospective on-line display. Flash backs to previous events are fun and give you a great opportunity to re-use wonderful content.

GREAT CASE STUDIES

Many students will be helping neighbours, making 3D masks, volunteering delivering food and much more. Ask students who are doing such activities to let you know and send you a photo. You will be able to show your local community the value of your students and the impact that they are making. Consider giving students a reward for their efforts and celebrate their contribution on your website and in social media channels. Send these to prospective students so they can see what a great group of students they are joining.

These stories would form an inspirational part of your 'Welcome back assembly' in the Autumn.

ENSURE THAT STUDENTS RETURN

First year students will have had a strange year in college. They will be very aware that their studies are vital and that their disrupted studies could have an impact on their exams. Help to keep them confident that they can stay on track with their studies. Ensure that the course content is delivered in such a way as to mitigate any impact on them completing the course, passing their exams and maintaining the college's exceptional performance outcomes.

Start alternative plans for re-enrolment. This might be on-line, but how can it enable students' access to the careers guidance that would normally be provided in college? Think through all stages of the enrolment process and how these can be on-line. As most first year students are not waiting for AS results, you will already have the information needed to inform decisions about each student's progress to year 2. So the re-enrolment process can take place without delay, providing reassurance to those students who can progress and clarity for those who are in difficulty and a guidance process to support them with their options.

We read in the news that young adults are securing paid employment during the pandemic in supermarkets and warehouses. This could present a risk in that some students are getting used to working and may be less inclined to return to their studies. Whilst this is not likely to be the case for large numbers of students, we need to ensure that all students are kept close to the college and their studies.

PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS

It is vital that colleges deliver on their recruitment strategy and secure planned enrolment numbers. For most colleges the deadline date for applications will have passed and they will have the student data. Some students might not yet have had their interview or been offered a place. They might be worried about how their Centre Assessment Grades might impact their offer of a place at college. Will the cancellation of this year's exams encourage students to continue at their school sixth form? They might feel this is a safer option, they might feel they have missed college induction opportunities and feel more comfortable staying in their school. They might feel that they have missed the opportunity to say 'goodbye' to school and this might encourage them to stay on. Many schools will certainly be further encouraging them to stay in their sixth forms and will use the opportunity to try and persuade them.

Start alternative plans for enrolment. The GCSE results will be provided on 20th August, as scheduled. How will colleges interact with their students if they still need to be socially distanced? How will you enrol hundreds of students in the normal enrolment period whilst giving everyone space? Could there be a greater move to an initial on-line enrolment process?

Play it right and you could induct students early, develop an early relationship with them and their parents.

KEEP IN TOUCH

Send letters to prospective students and their parents. Advise them how the college will manage the Centre Assessment Grades and students' enrolment at the college, especially if the college is partially closed. Ask them if they have questions and consider managing this through on-line chats during certain hours. Send them information about the college, this could be an early induction or a virtual tour. Provide them with some of the activities that they will have to look forward to.

Arrange on-line or telephone interviews for those who have not yet been through the process - they should be at home, so hopefully it should be easy to get hold of them! You will be able to answer all of their questions during the interview.

PROVIDE COURSE CONTENT

Provide prospective students with an overview and some more detailed course content. This could be generic such as study skills or subject-specific pre-course reading and activities, based on their course choices.

SEND TREATS

There may not be as much levity in students' lives at the moment, so a small chocolate bar with a letter could go a long way in these circumstances! Keep it fun; students will appreciate a bit of fun and a small token of care.

EVENTS

Many events will be missed: interviews, invitations to performances, taster days, inductions etc. See which of these can be on-line. What can take their place? Year 10 students who would normally be attending taster events could have a virtual taster session sent to them. Work with your feeder schools and see if they will send this out to the year 10 students who should have been attending. Work with the schools and see if the year 10 events could take place at the start of year 11, or consider evening workshops for these students.

MARKETING

If you have recently signed up to an outdoor marketing campaign, you will know that this is unlikely to have the impact you hoped for as your market is, on the whole, locked down. If you have done any advertising during this period, contact your agency and see if they can provide you with a significant reduction to re-run the campaign again in the future. Now would be a great time to do targeted on-line advertising. Students will be spending long stretches of time every day on-line and you can reach them in a cost-effective way.

Your message can be supportive and gentle; focus on what their concerns will be and how your college can support them through these unusual and uncertain times.

SCHOOL LIAISON

The school liaison team can still be working closely with schools. Discuss with schools how they can support you in accessing students who might not yet have applied to college. Try and ensure that the year 10 students do not miss out on taster days by holding them on-line. Forming links with curriculum staff has never been more valuable. If these links are not in place, now is the time to form them. The maths teacher might be very happy to get some on-line resources from you and to work in partnership.

COMMUNICATING

Think through your communications plan for all stakeholders. We have focussed on current and prospective students and their parents, but what about employees, the local community, alumni, sponsors and suppliers. How you communicate at this time will be how you are viewed after this period of time.

Be supportive and caring with your employees. Ensure that there is still formal communication filtering throughout the organisation as well as communication from line managers to specific staff groups. Show that you care, be available and keep in regular contact.

If you have placed significant orders and no longer need these, speak with the supplier and see how you can work to get the best possible outcome.

Keep everyone informed, keep it personable and everyone will appreciate your efforts now and after this period of 'shut-down'.



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Glove Consulting will be hosting a session at the SFCA Summer Festival 2020.

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