

WHITE PAPER - TECHNOLOGY FOR ADMISSIONS OFFICES
IMPROVING SERVICE AT THE POST-ACCEPTANCE/PRE-REGISTRATION PHASE

DRAFT

by Yann Lechelle (y@etheryl.com), CEO and Founder of Etheryl

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As the various rankings and accompanying controversial debates illustrate, top business schools are indeed very competitive. And while those rankings mostly evaluate quantitative parameters such as GMAT scores, salary increases and number of papers published by the faculty, they often fail to include softer indicators such as service level. Rightly so, since service levels are very hard to measure, compare and often identify. In this paper, we will focus on the service level offered to prospective students from the time they receive their letter of admission, until they finally reach campus and register, or decide not to join. This period can last up to a year for candidates admitted early or for deferrals. The level of service offered to the prospects during this period has a direct impact on the following three typical case-study attributes: cost, revenue loss and finally, competitiveness.

First, a biographical description of the recently accepted candidate is in order: typically a young professional on the rise, very anxious to start the chosen MBA or next best, sometimes married with children, sometimes a foreign citizen, and often living thousands of miles away from campus and quite possibly in a different country or continent. Almost invariably, the candidate has to turn her life around from the above to that of a student, ready to assimilate knowledge on day one, and with the assumption that everything else will be settled (housing, transportation, visa, financing, kindergarten, nannies, etc...). If anything, business schools are very much in the business of relocation!

So, why is it that, although MBA candidates are recruited on their ability to defy challenges, most admissions offices simply send their prospective students 1/ a welcome letter and/or email and 2/ a welcome pack with detailed yet static instructions on how to get there? Granted, most institutions also will have dedicated one or a few people to address those issues and act as relocation and transition agents. Unfortunately, typical admission offices are understaffed and mostly seen as cost centers by the rest of the institution. Hence, the level of service during what we believe is a crucial phase often reaches the bottleneck ratio of too many demanding prospects for non-scalable and already overwhelmed resources.

Our research has shown that incoming students were very eager to get started with the program. In fact, applicants derive their energy from their desire to graduate from their current position and to challenge their own *status quo*. Hence, these individuals are very much on the move, already at the psychological level, and soon at the physical level. This psychological energy is a byproduct of the demanding application process and in the case of an accepted student, the euphoria that follows the good news of getting into a program. Hence, individuals will build-up on their momentum to transform the psychological projection of themselves as students to actual students. As mentioned above, they will have to

deal with a complete array of issues to finally make it. And if the prospects are as determined as they were to get through the admissions filters, you are certain to face a highly demanding individual. As the etymology of this word suggests, a high degree of individual issues will arise and will need to be resolved. The first line of fire will be the admissions office which will have to cope with hundreds of emails, phone calls (often shielded) and sometimes-angry young professionals who think they deserve all the attention because they will pay a significant sum of money to the institution, and perhaps rightly so. The bottleneck is obvious.

This is exactly where technology can help, and in the current case, perhaps unexpectedly. The following diagram introduces our first suggestion on how to decrease the strain on the administration:



Figure 1 - leveraging the peer-to-peer effect

Currently, admissions offices have to deal with numerous phone calls and emails (represented by the black arrows above). Here, we suggest that accepted students likely to contact the institution will perhaps have peers in a similar situation, and who in turn, will most likely hold the answer to the issue at hand. Hence, we propose to partially redirect the one-way applicant pool from the admissions office support outlet, to within the applicant pool itself. Such a feat may be achieved with an exclusive online community space in which accepted students may interact, and subsequently exchange tips. In fact, our experience has shown that prospects are so zealous that they will go the extra mile to help a future fellow student. The application filter has produced a pool of highly competitive individuals, it might as well benefit from it! A 2001 Forrester Research report on CRM (a close cousin to SRM - Student Relationship Management) indicated that support phone calls and emails on average cost \$33 and \$10 respectively. By optimizing the process and effectively transferring some of the repetitive FAQ interactions to the students themselves, the institution may be able to reduce its cost of dealing with prospects, and most likely, improve its quality of one-on-one service for serious issues that really do require the full attention of an administrator.

The technology required to achieve the above does not need to be complex or expensive. However, it needs to contain several key ingredients for it to be efficient and enticing to the prospective students, and also reflect their individuality as much as possible. Typically, an online community backbone comprises a forum or bulletin board (for asynchronous threads), complemented by a chat room (for synchronous discussions). Password protected individual user accounts should preserve the identity of the user to ensure a continuum until the prospect reaches campus and meets the community in the flesh. Better implementations of the system will include a mini-bio and mini-resume of the prospect and if possible, a picture, again, to reinforce the relationship with their real-life persona. These elements are crucial to establishing a relationship of trust within the virtual community. In fact, anonymity must be avoided to ensure that the pre-student online community closely resembles the on-campus community of students who interact in person. On the other hand, the system must respect the privacy rights of those who do not want to be seen within the community, perhaps by fear of letting their own boss find out too early that they are about to leave their job! These people should not be allowed to be anonymous however, but merely invisible to the rest of their peers, until they wish to "speak-up." Contrary to open communities that flourish on the Internet, this closed-community must be tightly managed and invite prospects as soon as they have been accepted, and remove prospects who are no longer in the loop (cancellations or other reasons).

Our second suggestion builds up upon the first. Here we want to reinforce the peer-to-peer and student-to-institution relationships as Figure 2 suggests. Typically, accepted students do not have a relationship amongst each other and at best, they have a relationship in standby with the institution. We suggest creating the former and strengthening the latter to reduce the "defection" effect, due to competing and external factors.

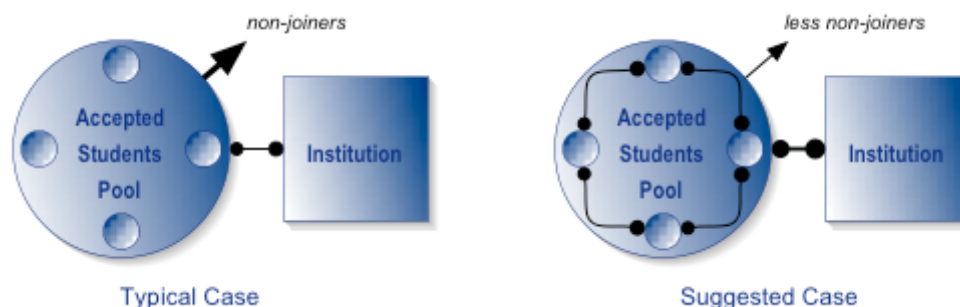


Figure 2 - Strengthening the two degrees of relationship

Most users of the system will end-up classmates and ultimately alumni, and thus, the online community is a good starting point to germinate the bonding. This is also the opportunity to virtually extend the length of the student-to-institution

relationship in time: by up to 100% for one year programs! By regularly going to your website to participate in the community before the program starts, and to discuss and get help from their peers, your prospects will be forced to acknowledge that they have started a relationship with your institution. The peer-to-peer relationship also gets going very quickly which means students will have known each-other for a while when they meet in person on campus (if they have not done so via impromptu or organized meetings via the online community). The following diagram illustrates the evolution of the intensity of the prospect-to-peer and student-to-institution relationships:

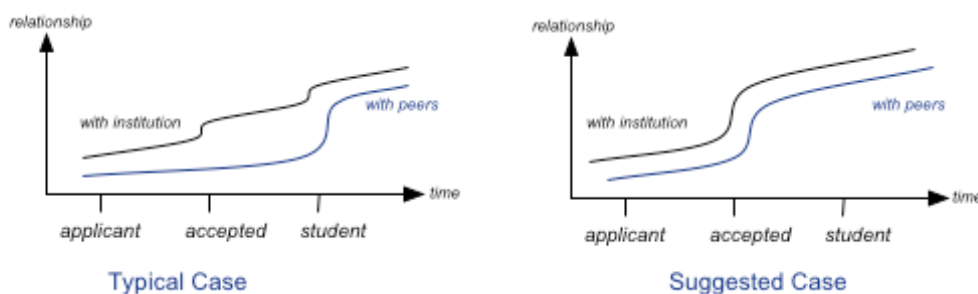


Figure 3 - Evolution of the two degrees of relationship over time

Developing these two degrees of relationship earlier contributes to increasing the yield or the ratio of the number of accepted students over the number of actually registering students (non-joiners arrows in Figure 2). More important than the yield however is the *stability of the yield*. Fluctuations in yield are what prompt admissions offices to constantly have to adjust their rolling admissions, wait lists and other buffering or deferral mechanisms. These tactics are complex to manage, and often unbearable at the human level: a wait-listed candidate has to put her life on hold and feels much like a second class citizen in relationship to the institution; not necessarily a good start for that particular potential student. A low fluctuation in yield can be achieved if there is a tight and constant interaction between the prospect pool and the institution. The worst-case scenario is when prospects just do not show up on registration day, without prior notice. That typically amounts to nearly a full foregone tuition, if a second-class citizen is not willing to turn her life around in one day that is. In and of itself, this shows a potentially large discrepancy in service for that student who will typically have to pay the same tuition as others who have been admitted a few months back! The potential revenue loss can be avoided by tracking those candidates who are likely to “defect” and guaranteeing a place to those most likely to join and prove that they were really worth admitting in the first place.

To accelerate the development of the relationships, the online community platform must be such that it respects and replicates equivalent real-life

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situations. A few features have been mentioned already, but it is important that we emphasize them here again: friendly and information rich user profile cards with mini-bios and resumes, and professional looking ID pictures. Another nice-to-have feature is a peer-to-peer direct emailing displaying a community-centric signature (e.g. "September 2003 MBA program, University of...") with a hotlink to the sender's profile card. Similarly, messages posted on the message board could be selectively emailed to each member of the community according to an individual and predefined filter. This will further accelerate the kinship between sub-clusters of members, by topic, nationality or other criteria. The sense of personal identity must be very strong so that individuals do not feel tempted to behave differently than they would, and eventually will on campus. The fact that MBA candidates are very competitive in nature typically accelerates the process, as they tend to develop their online image very swiftly and professionally. As we have seen many times, accepted candidates will out-compete themselves to try and be the "most social" or "most helpful" of the batch, which in turn feeds back into the system. To maximize the peer-to-peer network effect, it is also good practice to let overlapping pre-student intakes also overlap and interact within the system (for programs with more than one intake per year), yet, making sure that their online identity clearly represents this. This holds true for multi-campus setups. Note however that a delicate balance between critical mass and diluted identity must be reached; it would be unwise to blend pre-graduate and pre-undergraduate students for the sake of critical mass - on the other hand, it does make sense to blend pre-MBA and pre-PhD users, as the latter, typically a handful of candidates, can greatly benefit from the first group without hurting its cohesiveness. On the other hand, to reinforce the student-to-institution relationship, your logo and "institutional" identity should be pervasive. The graphical design of the prospects community site should therefore be tailored to blend logically with the rest of the web site, and probably be accessible under the "Admissions" section, and with a link typically named "Admitted Candidates Online Community". Not only does this help the candidates migrate smoothly from applicant to admitted, it also adds a level of exclusivity. To complement this effect, or rather to not counteract it, the online community platform should be free of all external advertising and spam: to that effect, we strongly advise against free-portals and third party solutions that will take advantage of your precious prospects listing.

Finally, once the first two suggestions are implemented, the competitiveness aspect can be considered. Indeed, the fact that many universities still do not have this level of service at the pre-student level makes them vulnerable to those that do! In Figure 2, the "non-joiners" arrow gets smaller for those who implement the solution and adversely, gets bigger for those who do not strive to develop the prospect-to-peer and prospect-to-institution relationships. We actually envision that the sort of technology we describe herein will become the *de facto* standard within five years in top-seeded, most wired or most international programs, and

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within ten years in all programs. This means that candidates will tend to expect increased interactions with their peers and with the institution, and probably be upset to find out that some institutions to which they have been accepted do not have it. Worse, this could become a criterion for applying to a given school in the first place. Of course, this also assumes that any implementation be technically up-to-date and well thought out. Many universities have developed in-house technology solutions organically and are sometimes stuck with inadequate design and legacy databases. Others rely on third parties to handle such developments. We actually believe that third party technology providers can efficiently service this space, especially as it deals with non-core educational matter (i.e. technology only as opposed to teaching material). In addition, third parties will compete with themselves and therefore dramatically improve the technology with their own R&D budgets. Universities are bound to benefit from this and gain a short to mid-term competitive advantage.

Creating a great online community platform for prospective students is strategically sound. Above and beyond its financial and competitive advantages, it is an essential piece of the larger and constantly developing student-to-institution relationship. It is too often the case that individual departments handle a batch of individuals separately, starting with marketing, then hand-off to admissions and then academia, and finally ending up with alumni affairs or external self-managed alumni communities. The experience from the student point of view is then a fragmented one, often implying redundant personal data entry, paper-based or digital, multiple sites and passwords to remember, and a lack of coherence. Apart from the academic realm, which is materialized on-campus and in person, the recommendations above can help create a solid backbone and be a catalyst during an uninterrupted and self-reinforcing period that we call the "student lifespan continuum".

About the author: Yann Lechelle is the CEO and Founder of Etheryl (www.etheryl.com), the makers of the award-winning NetVestibule technology platform. NetVestibule was specifically designed to address the "student lifespan continuum" mentioned in this paper, and is offered as a turnkey solution that starts with a fully hosted online community platform for accepted students.