



Short Communication

# Filling the Barrel: Innovative Marketing Strategies in an MSN Program

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In a Master of Science in Nursing (MSN) program in the southeast United States, recruitment, retention, and enrollment have been a concern. Attracting competent nursing students and maintaining enrollment can be a difficult task. Prospective students have diverse options and are becoming more selective regarding the educational institutions they choose to apply for and enroll in. Nursing students desire educational programs, which meet their wants, needs, interests, and goals [1].

In today's competitive market, it is imperative for nursing administrators to initiate successful marketing strategies, which can effectively impact enrollment and recruitment [2]. Recruitment and retention of nursing students requires integration of creative approaches to increase enrollment for the program and university [3]. In the Fall of 2019, the Director of Graduate Nursing and the MSN Program Coordinator launched unique marketing campaigns to garner the attention of potential students via innovative face-to-face interactions and establishing an impactful online presence.

With multiple tools and methods for marketing, the administrators decided to choose strategies that were appropriate to the specific needs and circumstances of the program. Before implementing the most appropriate marketing strategies, the attributes of the target audience were considered. Pratama and Prasetyaningrum (2021, as cited in Nuriadi, 2021) [4] suggested contemplating the characteristics of the target audience to assist program administrators in developing successful marketing campaigns. According to Elrod and Fortenberry [1], target marketing is a logical process to pursue characteristics and attributes that entice a particular group to forward patronage and become consumers. In this article we will share innovative approaches used to "Fill the Barrel" to boost admission and enrollments in the MSN program.

## Innovative Strategies to Fill the Barrel

### Face-to-Face and Marketing Materials

In the educational arena, prospective students have diverse options for achieving a preferred career trajectory. Potential students seek a financial option, which allows them to achieve their individual expectations and professional goals. Administrators for the graduate program decided to use varied approaches to build and sustain relationships with prospective students. Marketing strategies were developed to promote brand awareness of the university while tailoring techniques to appeal to a younger, diverse generation of nurses.

The university is branded as the friendliest campus in the south; thus, a deliberate focus was placed on building rapport with students and establishing sustainable relationships. A face-to-face marketing campaign was developed as the administrators believed that students value honest and direct communication. The approach proved to be a useful as it facilitated the formation of relationships and influenced the thoughts of prospective students.

One example of this approach included administrators scheduling a visit to the classroom of fourth and fifth semester Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) students. Authentic engagement occurred along with recruitment for the graduate nursing program. Relationships were formed as students engaged with future instructors and administrators. Another example included a unique approach to establishing relationships with practicing nurses in the hospital agency. Multiple face-to-face visits were conducted at diverse agencies. Marketing and informational tables were set up outside the entrance to the hospital cafeteria during breakfast, lunch, and dinner hours. Promotional gifts, candy, and university branded items were provided for free as a method

to attract practicing nurses to visit the marketing table. Again, this proved to be a successful marketing tool for the graduate nursing program. A final marketing strategy was the development of an “open house”. The open house was held at a centrally located part of campus where undergraduate students congregate for meals, coffee, and to visit the bookstore. Again, promotional items, candy, and university branded items were provided for free, and marketing of the graduate programs occurred. The approach was successful as many students discussed career prospects and took information for family members.

### **Website and Social Media**

Khalid et al. postulated; effective marketing is an essential element of running a successful program in an era of intense competition. A key element is to use online methods and social media technology [5]. Therefore, innovative marketing strategies were used focused on promoting an online presence and engaging in social media platforms. Based upon Khalid and colleagues suggestions, the administrative team embarked on revision and refinement of the current MSN program website. The revision included Search Engine Optimization (SEO) to enhance traffic flow to the website. Furthermore, the website was redesigned, using best practices, to simplify navigation and promote visibility of the program. The strategy facilitated a quick and easy approach to potential students in finding relevant information such as plans of study, cost of the program, and the admission process.

Moreover, social media technology was used on various platforms. According to Quesenberry [6], effective marketing campaigns include integrating advertisement on diverse social media platforms to communicate relevant components of the program. The administrators developed marketing campaigns which included the use of local radio stations, newspapers, Facebook, Instagram, X (formerly known as Twitter), and television. Outdoor advertisement, in the form of static and digital billboards were used to promote the MSN program in high traffic areas. The administrative team worked closely with the university marketing department to increase visibility on these diverse social media platforms. Paid social media advertising was used to spread information about the program and to showcase opportunities for free application through Graduate Studies and to build brand awareness. Geo-fencing marketing opportunities were employed in the state where the online program is offered and in contiguous states to target audiences [2].

In addition, the school’s website and marketing materials incorporated QR codes, which would direct prospective students to the website and relevant content. These combined efforts fostered brand awareness and assisted the administrative team in forming meaningful relationships with nursing students.

### **Email Blast and Serial Emails**

Email marketing, which is considered a form of digital marketing, was used to engage the target audience. The specific type of email marketing used by the administrative team was in the form of serial emails, which were sent to prospective students who have expressed an interest in admission to the graduate nursing program. Any student who had not completed the admissions process was sent an email to facilitate engagement. Promotional and informational content was included to create an online presence and create brand awareness for the program. Additionally, a free application to the university was offered in the email and on the university’s graduate studies website as an incentive to apply or complete the application process. The administrators also simplified the application process to remove any barriers or obstacles in completing the application.

Tailored videos with genuine messages outlining details about the graduate nursing program were developed to reach a target audience. The videos were personal, emotional, and designed to evoke thoughtful, meaningful relationships with nursing students. The belief was that narrated video messages were a creative strategy to convey caring to prospective students.

### **Tuition, Fees, and Collaborative Agreements**

According to Nuriadi [4], universities are competitive in regard to ensuring reasonable costs for students pursuing a graduate nursing degree. There are contributing factors, including economic reasons, which may influence a student’s decision to apply for admission and maintain enrollment in their program of study. To address these potential concerns, a comparative market analysis was conducted to assess tuition and fees.

Graduate tuition and fees were evaluated in an effort to enhance admission, enrollment, and student success. The overarching goal was to create an easier, more affordable pathway to a graduate nursing degree. Approval was obtained from the university’s tuition and fees committee to waive graduate nursing student fees and out of state tuition. Also, the tuition rate for online credit hours were adjusted to be equivalent to that of a traditional on campus graduate student.

In addition, the administrative team established collaborative agreements with several local hospitals and two hospital agencies in contiguous states. The benefit of obtaining a graduate nursing degree was highlighted. Emphasis was directed toward preparing nurse leaders for administrative roles within the organization with the knowledge, skills, and abilities to function as change agents focused on improving patient outcomes. The collaborative relationship streamlined the admissions process and facilitated an economical approach for students enrolling in a graduate nursing

program. The intention was to foster a seamless transition into the graduate nursing student role [3]. The agreements were designed to address perceived barriers of high tuition costs and to highlight the benefit of obtaining a graduate nursing degree.

### **Creative Advisement and Plans of Study**

The administrative team developed an advisement process to ensure greater student success, which included assisting students in developing a realistic plan of study consistent with completing the program within the allotted timeframe [3]. The team worked closely with a university-wide initiative focused on implementation of an integrated system to proactively manage student success. The system streamlined communication strategies between students, advisors, faculty, and administrators. An overarching goal of the system is to maintain open communication and ensure students stay on track with their plan of study. For example, academic concerns can be addressed early in the semester, problem-solving approaches can be implemented, and flexible plans of study can be created for the professional, adult student. The success system was an effective tool for student success, facilitating retention, and enrollment efforts.

### **Conclusion**

In summary, the administrative team used a plethora of approaches for recruitment and enrollment of potential students and retention of current graduate students. Successful approaches and marketing campaigns were developed and implemented to

address the specific wants and needs of the target audience. The efforts proved to be worthwhile as enrollment in 2020-2021 (an extremely difficult time during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic) academic year was consistent with prior years. Likewise, student admission and enrollment have consistently increased for the academic years of 2021-2022 and 2022-2023. Currently, the graduate nursing program is thriving in a highly competitive market as we continue to fill our barrel.

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