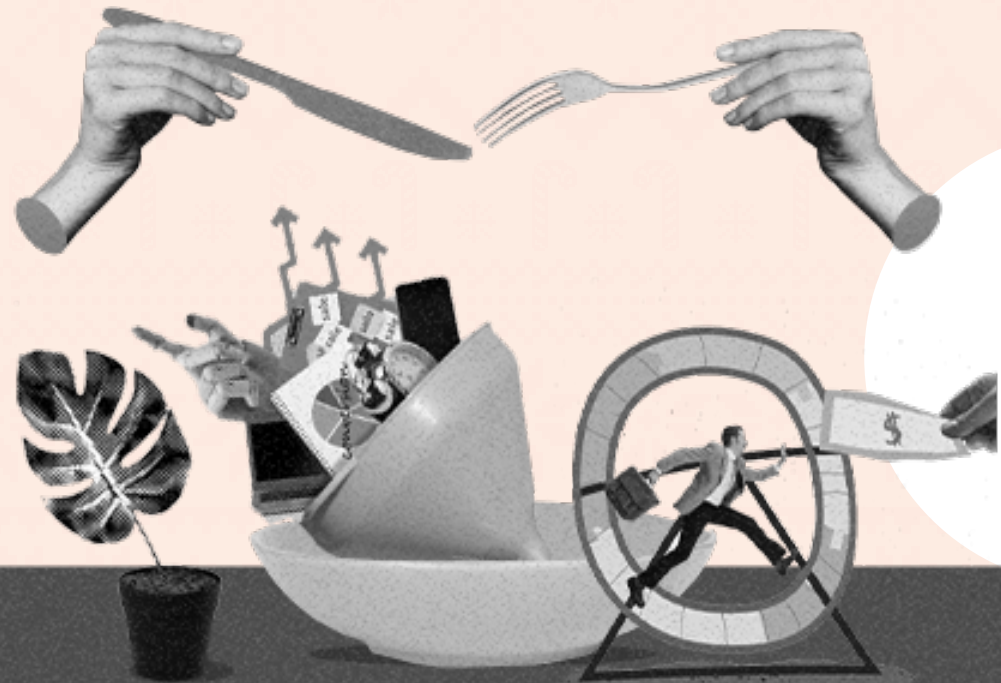# Dissecting the enrollment funnel

A guide for education marketers

Index

Introduction

The traditional sales funnel is a tried and true method for bringing new customers into the fold. It's simple, it works well, and it's easy to use as a framework for generating leads and closing sales.

That said - today's generation of students is more informed. They have more options. And they know it! Put simply, to compete with the needs of a new generation of students, marketers need to refine and optimize their approach.

The flywheel approach allows you to do just that by helping you focus on the entire enrollment process from start to finish: It's a holistic approach to enrollment that recognizes the value of all touchpoints in the process. This is an iterative model for thinking about how to improve your enrollment process. It begins with a high-level view of the entire process and then breaks it down into smaller, more manageable pieces. The goal is to identify which components are working well—and which ones aren't—so that you can implement changes that will yield better results over time.

Like most things in life, the enrollment funnel has evolved. It's not a simple step-by-step process anymore.

In recent years, with the widespread availability of information on the web and easy-to-use online application systems—as well as changing demographics—the enrollment funnel has become a less centralized paradigm.

For example, prospects may not respond to initial contact, but still apply (skipping the inquiry stage), while other students remain anonymous until shortly before applying.

These shifts have led enrollment managers to adapt multi-dimensional approaches to student recruitment. In addition to implementing robust communication plans at each stage in the enrollment process, admissions offices now place greater emphasis on optimizing their websites and meeting the expectations of "secret shoppers" with tools like virtual tours, social media and mobile resources.

An introduction to the traditional sales funnel

The traditional sales funnel, also known as the marketing funnel, is a metaphor for the process of moving potential customers through the sales cycle. It's a way to visualize and understand how people move from one stage to the next. Traditionally speaking, it is a tool to track your leads through the process of buying your product or service. The idea behind it is that every lead who contacts you has some interest in purchasing your product, but they will not all convert during their first contact with you. In fact, most people will not purchase anything until they have been exposed to several different options and convinced by multiple sources that the product is right for them.

Does it define the sales cycle?

At the heart of it, the sales funnel defines how prospects move from awareness to consideration and then ultimately purchase. It's a framework for understanding the stages of the prospect's decision-making journey and helps you ensure you are talking to your customers at the right time and in the right way. It also allows you to understand which educational materials are most effective for each stage of their process — whether that's a blog post, case study or video. The results can be staggering: according to HubSpot's 2017 State Of Inbound Report, 82% of all leads come from inbound marketing efforts (i.e., content), while only 18% come from outbound efforts such as cold calling or emailing someone with whom there is no relationship established (yet).

Where does the sales funnel fail?

The sales funnel is based on a series of assumptions, and these can often lead to its failure. A common assumption is that the sales cycle is linear and can be segmented into distinct stages. However, this is rarely the case. In reality, it's more of a circle than a straight line. For example, many prospects will start out by researching your business and then move on to consider whether they need your product or service before finally coming back to you once they're ready to buy. Another issue with the funnel approach is that it's often oversimplified, leading to a lack of personalization at each stage along the way.

There's also a tendency for marketers to put all their eggs in one basket when it comes down to defining goals for each stage—but this strategy won't work unless every channel has its own metrics so that you know exactly what kind of response rate you should expect from each channel at any given point in time (and whether there are any outliers).

To ensure that your funnel is effective, marketers need to use a holistic approach by considering all marketing channels as part of an integrated funnel. Instead of treating each channel as a standalone entity that delivers its own results, think about how they interact with each other and how they can be combined in order to achieve better results.

Fundamentally, the sales funnel is a guideline. It's not a set of rules that you have to follow strictly; rather, it's a way of thinking about your business that allows you to make more informed decisions.

The anatomy of a sales funnel is fairly simple. At its most basic level, it consists of three parts: the top of the funnel, the middle of the funnel and the bottom of the funnel. Each part plays a valuable role in your conversion rate and overall success, so let's take a closer look at each one.

- Top of the funnel (TOFU): The goal of the top of the marketing funnel is to grab the attention of a wide range of prospects.   This is where prospects become aware of your institution.

  One top-funnel strategy is content marketing, where schools can create ebooks or write blogs to capture the attention of a wider audience. Another very popular tactic for this stage is paid advertising.

- Middle of the funnel (MIFU): Once marketers have captured attention, they must nurture interest in order to convert prospects into paying students.

  Middle-funnel marketing tactics narrow in on prospects who have shown interest and further involve them with social media engagement, email marketing, and landing pages.

- Bottom of the funnel (BOFU): At the bottom of the funnel, the marketing strategy is to convert interested prospects.

  For schools, bottom-funnel marketing tactics include financial aid consultations and school visits. These lead prospects from initial interest to enrollment.

(TOFU)	Top of funnel
(MOFU)	Bottom of funnel
(BOFU)	Middle of funnel
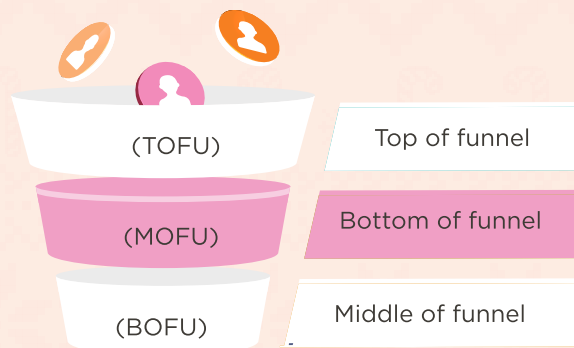
The diversity of marketing funnels has made this strategy both challenging and innovative. Some are digital in nature, while others incorporate a variety of traditional and new marketing tactics. To fully take advantage of marketing funnels for your institution, create and test multiple versions.

- Lead Magnet Funnels: These are offers made to a target audience in exchange for their commitment to engage with your institution's core offering. If a prospective student wants a guide to choosing the best school, they can access this resource by exchanging it for contact information. This will help you build a list of students who are interested in your program, whom you can contact periodically to remind them that your course is still available.

- List Building Funnels: In this type of marketing funnel, you're not offering anything in exchange for contact information. Instead, you're asking questions that will help you understand your prospective students' needs and goals. This will help you identify their interests so that when they become ready to enroll in your program, they'll already know what they want from it and why it's right for them.

Once you have your list of prospective students, you can start sending out emails that will help them become aware of the fact that your program exists. You could also use social media to reach out to them, but be careful not to come across as too salesy or pushy. It's best to post updates about your school and share related content that might be useful for someone who is interested in learning more about it. If you're not sure how to approach this step, try asking someone who knows how to write sales copy for a few tips. You could also take a look at some of the emails you've received from other organizations that offer similar services and see if any of them would work well for your school.

- Webinar Funnels: These are another way for your institution to offer resources and collect contact information from parents and students. For example, you could host a webinar about the programs that your school offers and build an email list of prospective students who would be interested in applying for them. The webinar can be the first step in a larger funnel that leads to a lead magnet and ultimately a conversion. This is one of the most effective ways your school can build an email list of prospective students who would be interested in applying for programs at your institution.

In the Digital Age, consumers no longer travel down a traditional sales funnel; rather they come in and out at different stages—sometimes even going silent for months before returning to purchase. The traditional sales funnel doesn't account for buyers' unpredictable behavior patterns.

The general stages of the sales funnel haven't changed, but the extent of influence has. The importance of marketing has increased, making collaboration between sales and marketing—which was already important—even more crucial. At its core, the sales funnel is predicated on a set of assumptions of consumer behavior, decision-making - and even their desires. By placing the consumer at the heart of the model marketers are better equipped to understand what's driving consumer behavior and can identify opportunities to influence it.
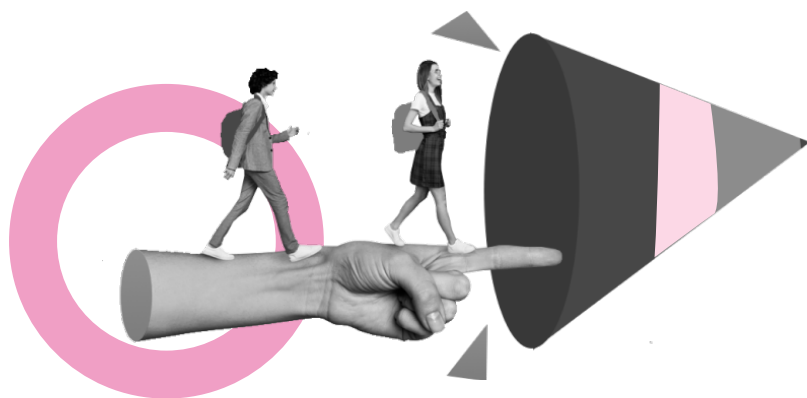
Pivoting toward the flywheel

Today, customer referrals and word-of-mouth marketing have become the largest influence on purchase decisions—so much so that entire campaigns are built around getting customers to recommend your product, or service to their friends. But traditional sales funnels treat customers as an afterthought; they don't drive them or nurture them during the purchase process. Funnels are excellent for attracting customers, but you have to consider how your customer base will help grow your business. What happens after a prospect enters the funnel?
They're the outcome — nothing more, nothing less. All of the energy you spent acquiring that customer is wasted, leaving you at square one.

Unlike the funnel, which is designed to transmit energy efficiently in one direction, the flywheel can store and release that same amount of power again and again without losing any momentum. This makes it an ideal tool for capturing—and repeating—the kind of steady growth most schools are looking for these days.

The amount of energy that a spinning object store depends on how fast it spins, the amount of friction between its parts and other objects, and its size. Think about train wheels or car tires—they store kinetic energy by rolling over rocks or potholes at high speeds. This is especially true when thinking about the ways that current students and their families can provide resources for your organization.

With the flywheel, you use the momentum of your happy customers to drive referrals and recommendations. Basically, your business keeps spinning with little effort on your part.

Here, we take input and turn it into output. The output pushes against resistance—the friction that holds us back from achieving our goals. This can be anything from a competitor offering lower tuition costs, or a lack of funding for education programs. Implementing a successful flywheel model requires an intimate understanding and analysis of your business. From goal setting to barriers - and everything in between.

As you work through each iteration of your flywheel — making changes in response to feedback — you'll gain momentum and reach new heights in your marketing efforts.

3 factors determine the amount of momentum contained in the flywheel:

1. How fast you choose to spin it
2. How much friction there is within it
3. How big the flywheel is

Since you're applying force to your flywheel, you also need to make sure nothing is opposing it — that means eliminating friction from your strategy. You can reduce friction by looking at how your teams are structured, why students are dissatisfied, and where prospects are getting stuck in the admissions journey.
Are all your teams aligned or are they operating in silos? Is your pricing straightforward or is it cluttered with confusing fees? Do you allow prospects to connect with you how, when, and where they want or are they forced to follow your strict process?

How did the funnel become outdated?

In 2018, HubSpot co-founder Brian Halligan bid farewell to the age-old marketing funnel technique of capturing quality leads. However, some companies continue to use marketing funnels. According to research conducted by Marketo in 2021, 570,000 of the top websites had sales funnel–based prospecting systems in place. Naturally, this seemingly sudden shift resulted in mass confusion, for marketers and business owners alike.
Is one better than the other? Does it depend on the business?

From the Inbound 2018 event, which gave birth to the concept of flywheel:
- For 37% of salespeople, prospecting is the most challenging part of their job.
- Also, the same study found that lead conversion is the #1 priority for 69% of marketers.

These stats clearly support the need to build an effective and efficient prospecting blueprint. This could be either a funnel or a flywheel.

Funnel versus flywheel

The funnel is a one-off deal. It has a beginning, middle, and end—and it relies on absolute cooperation from your prospects.
The flywheel is different. It's not a single burst of activity; it's an ongoing process that keeps going after the initial investment has been made. The goal is to keep adding fuel to the flywheel over time so that eventually it becomes self-sustaining and keeps spinning without your intervention (like an engine). A good example of this is Facebook Ads: If you're running ads without focusing on building up your email list first (a core part of their flywheel), then it's likely that most people who sign up won't turn into paying customers until they see another ad from your business—which means those marketing dollars aren't going toward immediate returns for you in terms of sales or leads generated from the ads themselves (i.e., money coming into your bank account).

It comes down to a new perspective

The world of digital marketing is ever-changing. What works today might very well be obsolete tomorrow. We're no strangers to this! As marketers - our job is to evolve. To re-strategize, optimize, and refine our approach to the digital marketing landscape. We're always on the lookout for new trends, technologies and tactics that will help us achieve our goals faster, cheaper and more effectively than ever before. It's exhausting, but - what if all it really took was a shift in perspective? Wouldn't that be a welcome change?

For example - instead of trying to optimize your marketing efforts for each individual platform, why not focus on the big picture and optimize it for the consumer experience? That's right, we're talking about a consumer-centric approach to digital marketing.

This is the future of digital marketing - and it's already happening. A consumer-centric approach to marketing means thinking about your customers' needs first and then using that insight to inform all aspects of your business.

It's a fundamental shift in mindset from the traditional way in which most companies approach digital marketing (i.e. what can we do to get more likes on Facebook, retweets on Twitter etc.) It's about delivering the best possible experience for your customers. It's about understanding their needs, wants and desires and using this knowledge to create strategies that will make them happy. It means putting yourself in their shoes and thinking about how they would like to interact with your business instead of just focusing on what you want from them.

While choosing this perspective is entirely personal, a tool like a flywheel can certainly help speed things along. You are the driver of the flywheel, and you can choose to make it go forward or backwards. If you want to move up the curve, stop focusing on what you can get from your customers and start thinking about how to give them something of value. It creates an inclusive community where anyone can join at any point; they don't need to start from scratch because they will be introduced by others who have been there before them and may even be trying out different features themselves at any given time (e.g., "What do I like about this product? Let me ask around.").

The funnel and flywheel are both powerful tools for creating growth. They both have their strengths and weaknesses, but the most important thing is to keep an open mind about how you use them.

Don't get stuck in one way of thinking!

Marketing is a process, not an event. It's a way of thinking, not just about your college or university but about your community and the world at large. It's an attitude toward doing business — an ongoing cycle that starts with the customer experience and ends with recruiting new ones. Marketing is not something you do; it's something you are.

Every institution has its own flywheel, which means that every institution must determine how best to use its resources to build momentum over time — and then maintain that momentum through continuous improvement initiatives. A flywheel is a tool for understanding the processes and activities that must be in place to make your institution more successful over time. The flywheel concept can be applied to any organization, but it's especially useful for higher education institutions because of their complex nature and diverse constituencies. A flywheel concept is also a useful tool for measuring the progress of your institution's efforts to achieve its mission and vision.

If you can't measure it, then it's hard to know if you're moving forward or backwards. Every institution also faces unique challenges related to its target audiences; these may include geographical restrictions on enrollment (such as campus size), limited funding for CI activities or lack thereof altogether (as in the case of historically underfunded campuses), or other barriers beyond their control such as state budget cuts affecting public institutions across the country. The good news? These factors can be taken into account when designing programs within each phase of this process!

Shifting from funnel to flywheel

An effective education marketing strategy should adopt a full-funnel approach. The top of the funnel is where your prospects are, and the bottom is where they become customers. The middle of the funnel is where you nurture leads until they're ready to convert into customers.

The goal of adopting this approach is to ensure that you have an integrated marketing strategy in place so that you can consistently communicate with your prospects through every step in their path from prospect to customer—or as we like to call it: "the conversion cycle."

It's important for educators and parents alike who are interested in improving their enrollment numbers to understand how these three stages work together because each stage requires different strategies depending on what stage people are currently at within their decision-making process.
By adopting a full-funnel approach to your strategy, you can optimize your efforts and offer an optimal experience for potential students. Much like an engine needs a flywheel to store energy, marketers need a marketing flywheel to garner the power of loyal customers. The flywheel is similar to the funnel in that it represents the customer journey. HubSpot coins these stages as:

- Attract
- Engage
- Delight

The customer base is at the center of a business wheel. The growth process begins with happy customers, who provide energy for rapid expansion. In flywheel fashion, the momentum created by this virtuous cycle propels each new initiative forward Everything relies on the customer experience. Loyal customers are the energy that fuels all growth—their feedback, loyalty and dedication never go unrewarded.

For companies to grow and thrive, they must learn how to attract customers by promoting their products or services in the most appropriate way possible. HubSpot created Inbound Marketing as a response to this need.

"We saw that people were tuning out outbound, interruption-based marketing tactics, and knew there had to be a better way. We believed businesses could grow better if they stopped interrupting people and instead, focused on attracting an engaged audience. So, we made it our mission to build the tools and resources needed to help millions of businesses do just that."

Michael Redbord: General Manager, HubSpot

Why would you choose a flywheel?

The concept of a flywheel is not new. But, it has only recently been applied to marketing. And there are several reasons why this approach can help marketers, institutions and entrepreneurs today. First, it allows you to draw a steady stream of prospects into your funnel without having to do as much work each time. Second—and perhaps more importantly—it generates repeat business and increases retention through loyalty programs and other incentives. And finally, it gives you the means to differentiate yourself from your competition by creating an experience that's unlike any other.

Identifying the areas where your efforts are slowing you down and removing them is essential to building a powerful flywheel for your business. As friction slows momentum, it's important not to ignore these points of resistance in hopes that they will fix themselves—they won't!

Just because something evolves, doesn't necessarily mean that it's fundamentally invalid. Inbound Marketing is simply another way of approaching the same problem. It's just as valid as outbound marketing, with its own unique set of benefits and drawbacks. When adopting a flywheel approach, some principles of your original funnel will remain, while others will change. The goal is to improve your performance by focusing on activities that have the greatest impact.

5 Techniques to turn your funnel into a flywheel

1. Find the friction: The first actionable step you can take to build a powerful flywheel for your business is to identify your friction points. You need to look at the different stages of your sales funnel—from point of contact through repeat business—and determine where customers are losing momentum.

   For example, if people are leaving your landing page without completing a conversion action like signing up for a free trial or downloading an ebook, then it's likely that they need help finding what they're looking for.

   Perhaps you are failing to convert leads once they get on your email list due to disorganized follow-up or lack of helpful content. Or maybe, it is failing to keep them around through incentives such as discounts and special offers—or perhaps even just good customer service! Once you have identified your friction points, the next step is to take action and remove them.

2. Put the prospect first: The key to building a powerful flywheel is always putting your prospects first. This means delivering a high-quality experience across all channels.

People buy products and services to solve their own problems or help them achieve a goal. By creating a system around your customers' experience, you can give them what they need at every stage of the journey.

3. Build momentum: The next step in building a powerful flywheel for your business is generating momentum. One of the most effective is by using content marketing.

Content marketing is the creation of valuable, relevant, and consistent content that attracts and retains the right prospects. By creating a steady stream of high-quality content (and promoting it effectively), you can create momentum—and accelerate student and customer acquisition! But - attracting new customers is only half the battle—keeping existing ones engaged can be just as important. Companies that use drip campaigns to regularly send emails with relevant content or offer incentives for their return are likely to retain more clients than those who don't.

4. Keep the speed: If you can get your flywheel spinning, momentum will propel your business forward. One way to get the flywheel moving is by using paid advertising to drive traffic into your funnel. Once you've started spinning it, keep it going by feeding that momentum with marketing activities and sales actions. You can also use social media to help keep the flywheel spinning. By sharing your content on social media and engaging with followers, you'll be able to generate buzz and momentum quickly.

5. Remember that word of mouth is its own kind of marketing: It should be clear that generating word of mouth is a great way to find success with a flywheel. Identifying happy customers likely to refer your business to others is a great way of generating word-of-mouth advertising. You can do this by surveying or monitoring social media for positive conversations about your brand. To create even more happy customers, you can use referral programs to incentivize students and parents to refer your school to their friends and family. This helps ensure that customers are more likely to recommend your company when they have something to gain from doing so.

While shifting from a funnel to a flywheel model may not be suitable for every business, there are many ways that you can improve your current funnel—such as adding new sales channels or improving the communication between departments.

Whether you focus on mapping out your go-to-market strategy, measuring your success rates, or restructuring your teams, stay focused on improving and optimizing your marketing funnel until it becomes a well-oiled machine. With the right approach, you can turn your funnel into a flywheel (or borrow components from the latter) that generates sustainable growth for your business.

At its core, using a flywheel approach is all about creating momentum and driving growth for your business over the long term.

Ultimately, the key to building a powerful flywheel for your business is to focus on generating momentum through consistent effort and quality work. Delighting and engaging your customers while also working on improving and optimizing every aspect of your funnel are the best ways to help it reach its full potential.