

Case Study

re-published from University Business, January 2017 edition

Improving Student Communication with Texting

Strategies for more effective outreach

*It's no secret that text messaging is the preferred method of communication for today's students over email, direct mail or phone calls; in a recent report¹, **nearly 80% of prospective students said they are open to receiving text messages from colleges and universities**. However, **less than 50% report being offered the option to text**. How should institutions address this gap by reaching students the way they prefer?*

Jim Wiseman, VP of enrollment at Carroll University, and Dave Marshall, president and product manager at Mongoose, note several strategies and best practices for texting current and prospective students in this article. They also elaborate on how incorporating texting into your overall communication plans can improve efficiency and effectiveness throughout the student lifecycle.

Dave Marshall: In early 2015 Mongoose built a texting platform, and as of today, over **400 higher ed institutions are using it**. Why are they using it? Because it has become extremely tough to communicate with students otherwise. They're not reading their emails or listening to voicemails. But they also don't want you texting them about every single thing, so we'll want to review some best practices.

But first, let's start at the top and provide some clarity. The most common question we are asked is: **Is it legal to text students?** The answer is yes, it's legal. The applicable law is the Telephone Consumer Protection Act, or TCPA, which bars a for-profit brand from using an automated technology to contact consumers. Most college institutions are not for-profit brands, so are largely exempt from the TCPA. The only time you would need prior consent from a student or a parent is if the text message is directly selling a product or service.

I've seen many legal teams read that law and the majority say we don't need to get an opt-in.

However, the marketer in me says **you should get consent**, especially if we're talking about prospective students. Once you get an applicant to accept, confirm, and then become students and eventually alumni, most universities will not need the opt-in. But you should absolutely let them opt out. The mobile phone is an extremely personal device, and if you abuse that medium, the student or parents will be pretty upset.

Jim Wiseman: Texting is all about quality contacts. A quality contact is two-way conversation. Any time we have a two-way conversation—regardless of whether it's text, email, phone calls, anything—we track that. For phone calls, it was taking 10 attempts to get two quality contacts. For email, it was taking 10 attempts to get 2.6 quality contacts. For texting, **10 texts gives us close to five quality contacts**. So this is an efficient way of starting a conversation.

The more quality contacts we have, obviously the better chance of yielding that student. We know we need six quality contacts minimum to have a chance at getting a student to enroll. Getting the first quality contact is the hardest, but texting seems to be the best way to get that ball rolling, and then the quality of the communications gets better.

A variety of uses

Wiseman: Texting is efficient, effective, affordable, and you can manage everything. When we were planning this with Mongoose Cadence, we said we needed something that a guy like me—a dinosaur—could figure out how to use. We need to be able to have genuine human conversations so that we can ask questions and constantly engage, instead of having it be one-sided. We wanted to be able to do it on our phone, tablets or desktop. And we wanted it to easily integrate with our student information system.

We believe in asking students to opt in, and we include the option on every form we have—the inquiry form, the printed one, the online one, as well as during the campus visit, on athletic questionnaires, in every email and letter, and we make it so that students can text us and that counts as an opt-in. They will opt in and let you into their inner circle only if you are a viable choice. **This is hugely predictive**. Now we calculate those opt-ins as part of our predictive points. **Our yield for texters is about 30 percent, and for non-texters is about 20 percent**. The opt-in and the fact that they're texting with us are huge predictors.

We text every day with students. Here's an example: We just sent one that says, "Hey, acceptance letters are being printed and will be mailed tomorrow but I wanted to be the first to tell you that you have been accepted to Carroll. Congratulations!" They'll get their emails and their letters as well, but this is a great way to do it. We use this texting for multiple campaigns. One is to notify them of certain things, but another is to create the two-way conversations, and those always end with us asking a question.

We also use texts for financial aid, retention, increasing engagement after face-to-face meetings, in surveys, and with athletic coaches.

Marshall: The end goal for many of our client institutions is to have a way to stay in touch with young alums, who are highly elusive. They change their name, they get married, they change their job, they change their address, they change email—so it's very hard to keep track. The thing they don't typically change is their mobile phone number.

But we don't want to just start texting alums out of the blue. What we have seen be successful with our clients is that they **condition the student with texting while they're current students**. A wonderful way to do this is to start with career services, for example, to boost attendance and awareness of a recruiting or career development event. Toward graduation, text a career survey, or to let them know where they can get their caps and gowns. After graduation, we can reach out to see how the job search is going, and tell them that we would love to help.

We aren't saying, "Donate to our school." That's not the first text. You need to keep cultivating the relationship. Texting can also be used to boost awareness and attendance of reunion weekends. Again, we're continuing to be helpful. The odds that they will opt out from this are not very high because you're being personal and you're being helpful.

Always give them the ability to text back to you. It's that back-and-forth conversation that builds the relationship. Once we've been texting with the student, perhaps first as a prospect, then as an applicant, then as a current student, and we help them get a job and we've kept in touch, then it makes total sense to see if they might want to help with the annual fund or fundraising efforts.

Re-published from [University Business](#).

¹Ruffalo Noel Levitz & OmniUpdate. (2018). 2018 E-expectations report. Cedar Rapids, Iowa: Ruffalo Noel Levitz. Available at www.RuffaloNL.com/Expectations.