Automated Engagement Optimizes Recruitment Efforts for Northern Illinois University

Northern Illinois University (NIU) has seven colleges that offer 56 undergraduate majors and 88 graduate and doctoral programs on its main campus in DeKalb, Illinois. To support its mission as Northern Illinois' public university focused on workforce and economic development, NIU's Division of Outreach, Engagement and Regional Development (OERD) specializes in providing educational resources to working adults. OERD delivers 63 undergraduate and graduate academic programs both online and at NIU's regional centers and other convenient locations.

To promote the programs to prospective students in ways different from the standard marketing to high school students, NIU OERD staff turned to marketing automation with Act-On. OERD staff uses marketing automation to track and engage prospects and integrates it with CRM to connect potential students with advisors. It's an entirely new way of approaching recruitment and Act-On has transformed the process for many programs.

Northern Illinois University

Highlights:

- NIU OERD team gained the visibility they needed to effectively track prospective students from the time they have filled out a form to the time they are applying for a program.

- The team improved the recruitment process using data obtained from marketing automation which showed how some program requirements were an unintended barrier to enrollment.

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Challenge

Most companies have a handful of products and just a few target markets. NIU has seven colleges and more than 60 separate regionally available degree programs. While technically not products, they need to be promoted to prospective students in much the same way. Until just a few years ago, NIU OERD staff reached those potential students through the NIU website, emails, and open houses. A four-person marketing team would review prospects, then refer them to advisors.

The process was inefficient and time consuming. Advisors had trouble identifying qualified prospects. The marketing team had no way to track potential students from interest to enrollment. Without a way to measure the success of the marketing efforts, any effort in the process appeared fruitless.

An additional problem was the increased number of inquiries from prospective students and the lack of financial resources to staff up to respond personally to each prospect. Advisors' time needed to be applied to those prospects who met the prerequisites for the program, while those who did not needed to be routed to other NIU offices.

"We knew we needed to do some sort of automation because we simply couldn't keep up with all the prospects coming in," says Anissa Kuhar, marketing manager for OERD at NIU. "We were trying to respond to them all individually, and that wasn't sustainable."

Kuhar turned to marketing automation to streamline and track prospective students from their initial website visit to enrollment.
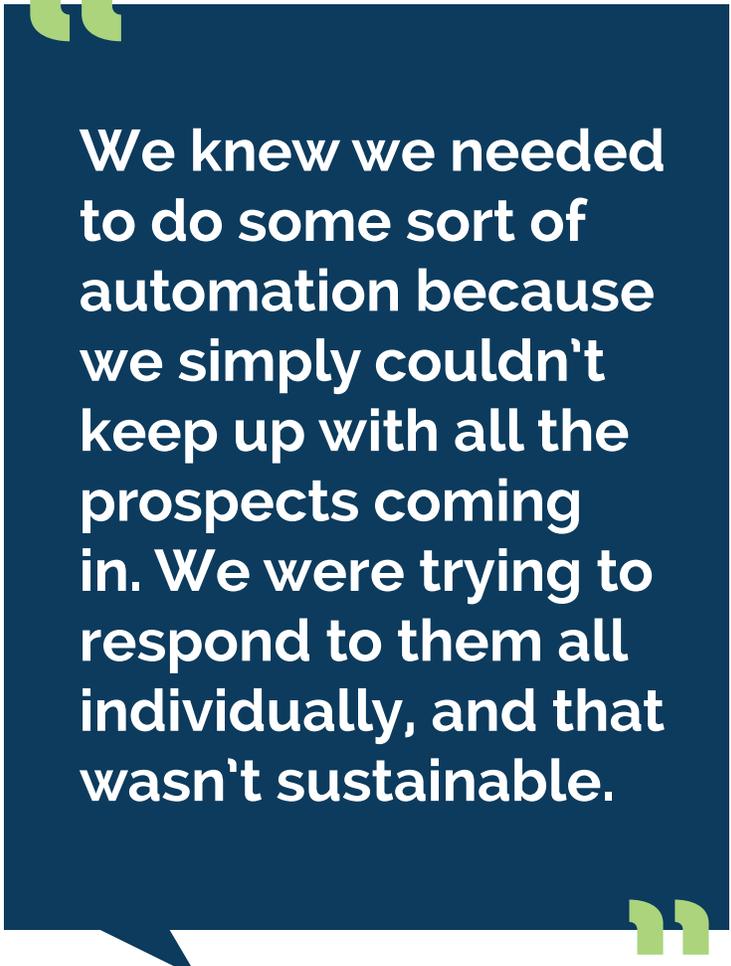
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ANISSA KUHAR
Marketing Manager/
OERD at NIU

Solution

NIU OERD uses Act-On to capture and sort prospects. If visitors are interested in specific programs, they submit contact and background information through a web form. Prospects are automatically sorted into segments based on the information they provide.

"We work with the different colleges and programs to create a profile of the ideal prospect," says Kuhar. "We look at educational backgrounds, job roles, credentials, and goals. We segment based on that information and send qualified prospects to the appropriate advisors."

The prospective students are routed to the CRM and assigned to academic advisors. Each prospect is prioritized based on how likely they are to enroll. Advisors can reach out to them for more information, or to encourage them to apply to NIU. They can also forward the contact to a transfer specialist in another department. "Advisors know a lot about a prospect right away," says Kuhar. "They can now work much more quickly and efficiently than before and help potential students find the right program."

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Results

With Act-On and CRM, Kuhar and her team can track prospective students from filling out a form to applying for a program. "If you can't see it, you can't manage it," says Kuhar. "Act-On has really enabled us to see and manage what our lead flow looks like all the way through the funnel. It makes us smarter and better able to manage and redirect how we're spending our resources."

Now the marketing team and advisors can identify the number of qualified leads that come into the system. They can also see how those leads "convert," or apply for programs. Besides being a great source of marketing metrics, it has given advisors insight into a prospective student's fit with program requirements that they never had before. "If we're not able to attract prospects to a program because of a requirement, we can see that based on the information students provide when they complete a form. And, we can talk with the advisor about changing that requirement or developing a program to fulfill a gap in a prospect's background," says Kuhar. "From a business perspective, we identified a gap in our product and we found a way to meet the market's needs."

It's a drastic change. Before marketing automation, NIU OERD and the advisors had little or no data on potential prospects until they actually contacted an advisor. Now as the profiles of potential students are analyzed, faculty can see how some program requirements are unintended barriers to enrollment. Changes in actual requirements or in messaging about them can be discussed and changed to improve recruitment, all based on data. "That's a tremendous amount of progress," says Kuhar.

In the future, the NIU OERD team plans to use behavior-based marketing to track prospect activity. They'll be able to see which web pages potential students visit and add that information to the profiles in the CRM. With the additional information, advisors will be able to help students find the best program fit at NIU.

About Act-On Software

Act-On Software is a marketing automation company delivering innovation that empowers marketers to do the best work of their careers. Act-On is the only integrated workspace to address the needs of the customer experience, from brand awareness and demand generation, to retention and loyalty. With Act-On, marketers can drive better business outcomes and see higher customer lifetime value. The Act-On platform provides marketers with power they can actually use, without the need for a dedicated IT resource.

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