

From the desk of...

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Who's Sending What, When, and to Whom? The Importance of Auditing Outbound Communication

Do you know which messages are being sent from which offices, when they're going out, and whether they're any good?

It's a deceptively simple question but one that surprisingly few enrollment leaders can confidently answer. Between the admissions office, financial aid, academic departments, student affairs, and the registrar, your prospective students and their families are likely being bombarded with emails, postcards, texts, and phone calls. And while the intention is to inform and engage, the actual experience can feel overwhelming, disjointed, or outright contradictory.

That matters.

It matters because prospective students don't see these units separately. They view your institution as a single entity, and **when communication is poorly timed, redundant, or confusing, it erodes trust.** It matters because families -- especially those navigating the process for the first time -- often don't know which information to prioritize. And it matters because poor communication design translates directly into lower engagement, lower conversion, and higher melt.

When institutional communications compete instead of coordinating, when student information systems (SIS) push out messages that are not monitored, or when departments send emails without knowing what other offices have sent, the impact can be damaging. **If your institution is investing in enrollment growth but hasn't audited its outbound communication strategy, you may be solving the wrong problem.**

Case in Point: The Overwhelmed Family

Imagine a family with a high school senior exploring your institution. In a single week, they receive:

1. A scholarship offer email from Admissions

2. A financial aid reminder from the Office of Student Financial Services
3. A registration nudge from the Honors College
4. Two generic newsletters from Student Affairs and the Registrar
5. A postcard about your upcoming admitted student day (which doesn't apply to them yet)
6. A voicemail from a student ambassador and a separate call from their assigned counselor

Nothing in that list is inherently problematic. In fact, each touchpoint is trying to serve the student. But together, it creates a fractured experience -- one that overwhelms more than it reassures. Worse, if those messages contradict or compete, students may begin to question the institution's overall organization, communication quality, and even their fit.

Now, layer on the parent experience. Parents often serve as secondary decision-makers, especially when affordability is a central concern. If they, too, receive multiple uncoordinated messages without clear sequencing or unified messaging, the result is cognitive overload (and indecision).

The Problem Isn't Message Volume but a Lack of Strategy

On most campuses, individual departments manage their own communications using different tools, timelines, and assumptions about the student journey. SIS systems may be configured for tactical automation, but not for cross-functional collaboration. In some cases, communications teams are pushing out beautiful campaigns with no idea how they intersect with student services or academic advising emails.

It's not uncommon to find duplicate reminders going out within hours of each other, outdated messages still live months after a campaign has ended, messages targeted at students who have already deposited, or a complete absence of affordability or outcomes framing during peak conversion season.

When these breakdowns occur, the question shouldn't be "why didn't they enroll?" it's "how could they have possibly made sense of what we sent them?"

The Value of a Communication Audit

A communication audit brings visibility and discipline to what is often a disjointed operation. At its core, the audit answers three questions:

1. What's being sent and by whom?
2. Where do breakdowns, redundancies, or contradictions occur?
3. How can message content, timing, and ownership be improved to drive enrollment outcomes?

When done well, a communication audit helps institutions:

- Visualize the full student and parent messaging journey across offices and channels
- Identify oversaturated weeks and under-communicated moments in the enrollment funnel
- Realign content sequencing to match actual decision-making timelines
- Embed affordability and career outcome messaging at critical points of influence
- Create shared calendars or governance practices to prevent internal message collision

The ultimate goal is not really to reduce volume (although that may need to happen). The key is to increase the clarity, relevance, and strategic impact of every message.

Why This Moment Demands It

With demographic shifts, financial aid policy changes, and increased student skepticism about higher education value, institutions cannot afford to rely on legacy communication structures. Understand that the competition isn't just other institutions, it's also the noise, distraction, and fatigue students feel when trying to decipher which email or text actually matters.

Moreover, personalization expectations are rising. Gen Z and Gen Alpha students expect messages that speak to their specific situation and goals. When they don't get that, they disengage... quickly.

Communication Is Infrastructure

We often think about recruitment strategy in terms of academic offerings, financial aid policy, or digital advertising. But none of those levers work unless they are communicated effectively. Messaging is infrastructure. If it's not structurally sound, everything else built on top of it is at risk.

Every VP for Enrollment, Admissions Director, and Marketing strategist should ask, "what is the lived communication experience of a student considering us?"

If you can't answer confidently, it's time to find out.

About the Author

Dr. Shane Pruitt is a Senior Consultant at Iron Bridge Resources and a nationally recognized enrollment strategist. He brings nearly two decades of campus and consulting experience to help institutions reimagine the way they recruit, admit, and support students.
