



The Power of **First Contact**

IN HIGHER ED



Introduction

Education is at an inflection point. Vocational and career schools are increasingly viewed as the more affordable path to good jobs. For anyone waiting to enter the job market, they are vital entry points, and competition between schools to bring those eager students into their programs is at an all-time high. Solely relying on reputation is not enough, vocational schools must actively build relationships with prospective students. **Relationships**, that start with the very first contact.

We analyzed data from various career schools throughout North America, marketing agencies, admission reps, and admission directors to determine best practices for that first contact. What we found was that every element of that initial conversation – when it happens, where it happens, and how it's approached – plays a significant role in which school the prospect chooses to attend

Very often, a student's decision is made based on that first contact.

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“There’s a saying in admissions... first to contact, first to contract.”

– Johan Moncada

*Former Director at Carrington College
and San Joaquin Valley College*

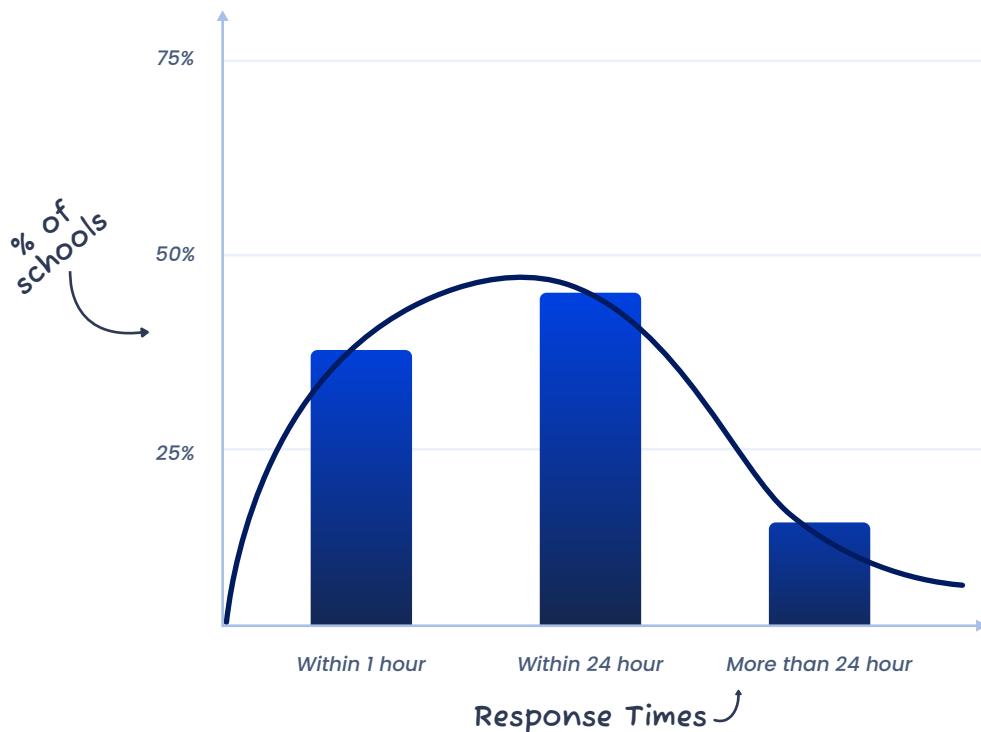
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Speed-To-Lead Is Critical.

Studies show that prospect conversion rates fall — to a shocking degree — if outreach is not made within five minutes of a prospect's inquiry.

Xant as part of [a 3-year study](#) on lead response management found that conversion rates were **eight times higher** when outreach happened in the first five minutes than if the contact came in just 60 seconds later.



That might seem like a wild statistic, but there are several reasons why it bears out.

- Students are most engaged in the time immediately after they make an inquiry, both in your school specifically and in enrolling at a school generally.
- Leads do not always land organically. They might arrive through aggregators that share leads across multiple schools. Whoever reaches out first, wins.
- Engagement increases over time. The more time Counselors have to build a relationship with a prospect, the greater the likelihood of conversion.

The reality, however, doesn't meet student expectations. About 80% of the schools we polled reach out to prospects within 24 hours. Only 39% could commit to making first contact in the first 60 minutes — still far outside that optimum five-minute window.

We consistently find that there is a direct correlation between 'first contact', speed-to-lead, and successful enrollment ratios. And there are many tools and services that can play a role in hitting those numbers if they're used in ways that play to their strengths. Even then, a complete strategy must look beyond just the timing and mechanics of outreach, because once you establish that First Contact, you must make the most of that opportunity.

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The likelihood of them answering the phone in the first minute is astronomically higher than after fifteen minutes or after an hour or after a day.

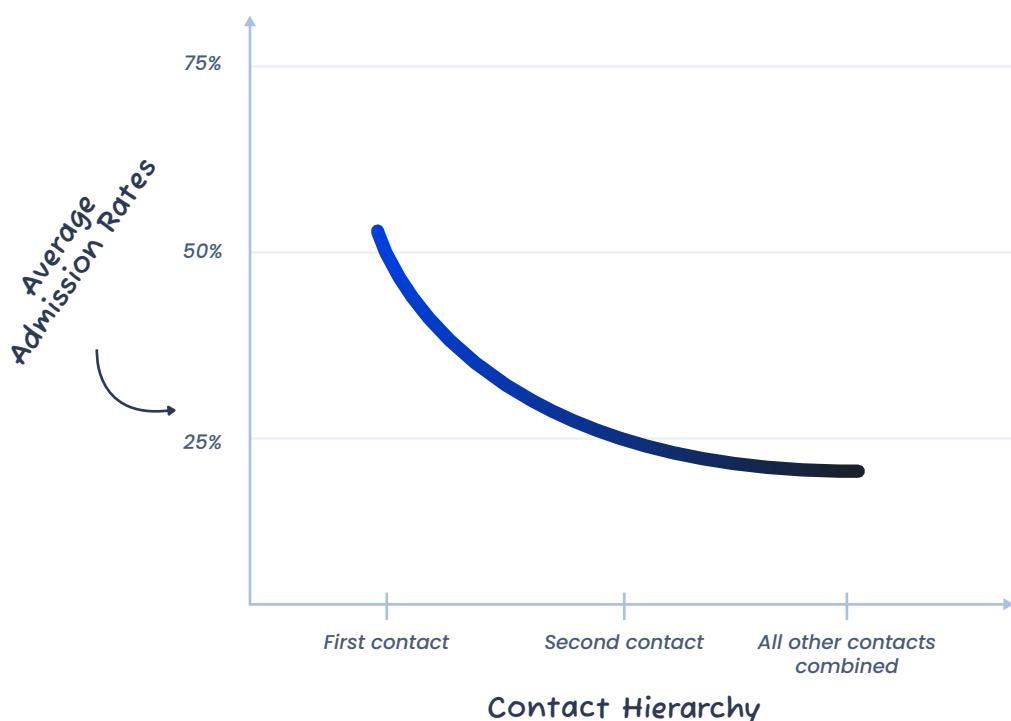
– **Jeff Gross**

VP of Operations, Salon Spa Academy



First Impressions Really Do Matter

Speed to lead has a major impact on admissions, but building a relationship with the student is just as important. Our data shows that no matter when a First Contact happens – five minutes after inquiry, one hour, or one day – the majority of conversions happened based on that initial outreach.



We see much higher rates of conversion if the prospect engages on that initial outreach, as opposed to any follow-up contact. Past the second contact, admission rates flatten out and do not change.

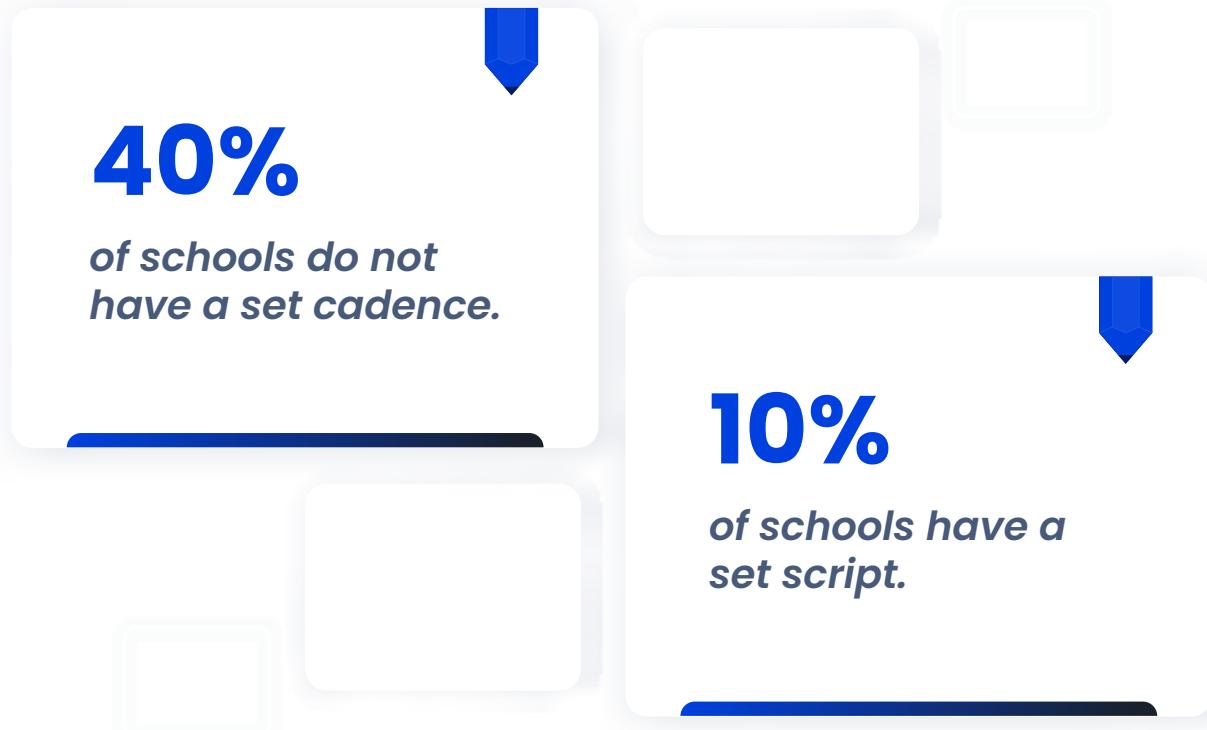
So, beating the competition to that first call is an important consideration. But even if nobody else is in the race, that first conversation has to be a good one.

What Works and What Doesn't

What's Your Contact Strategy?

So, let's put that information together and talk best practices for what you say in your initial outreach.

Phone anxiety is a real challenge—today, most people strongly prefer texting over answering calls. If you check your stats, roughly 70-80% would have filled out your forms on their mobiles. So even before that first call, sending a quick text to get the conversation started can engage your prospects early... if you send them something that piques their interest.



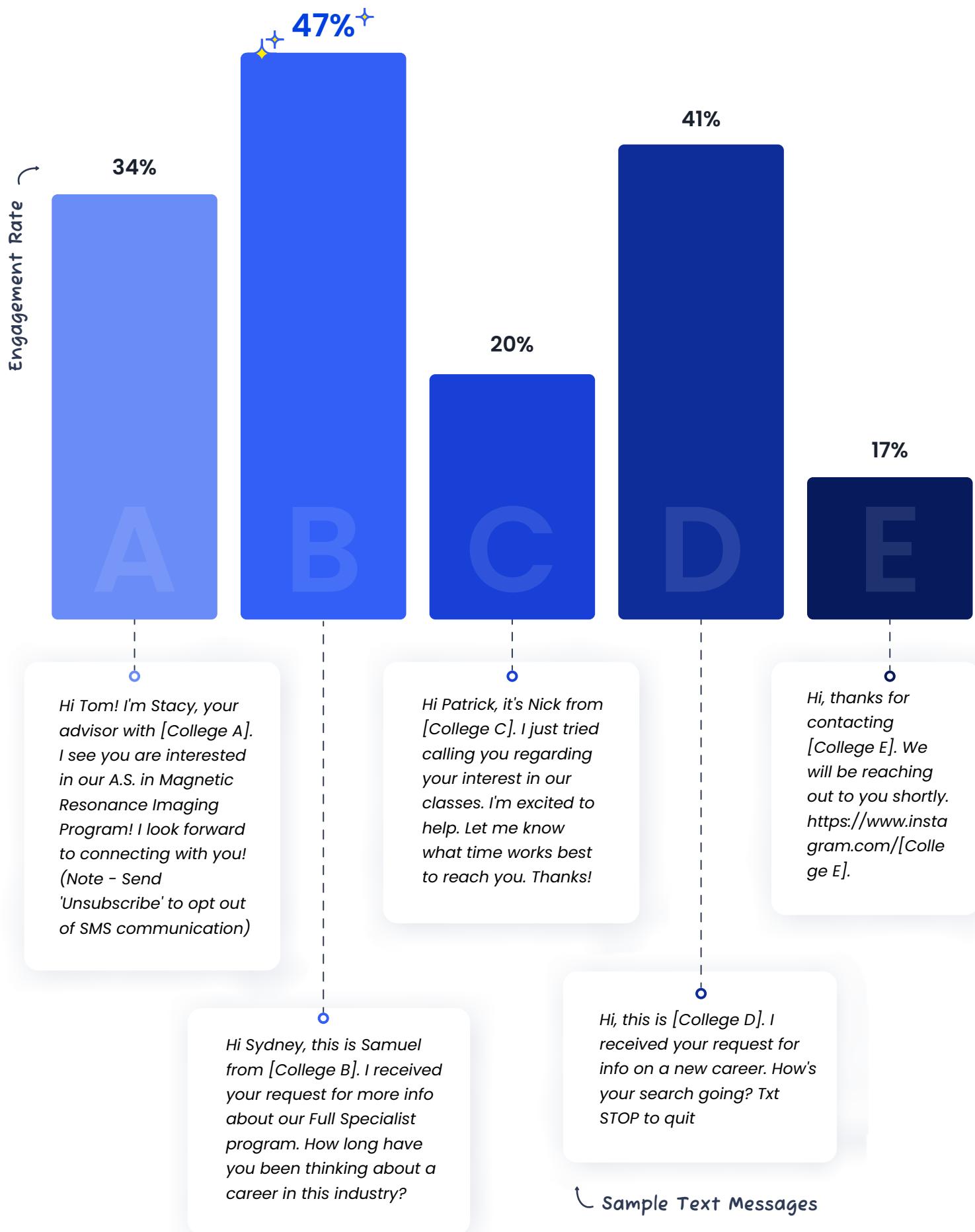
40%

*of schools do not
have a set cadence.*

10%

*of schools have a
set script.*

Here are five real pre-call texts from five different schools:



You can see a good range of strategies here. Schools A, C, and E use more direct language, while Schools B and D take a more open-ended, friendly approach, ending on a question to prompt a response. Moreover, Schools A and B are far more personalized, while Schools C, D, and E don't mention as many details. C and E feel very vague as conversation-starters.

And the numbers reflect that.

A and B's approach – self-introduction, plus specific details on the prospect's interests – clearly resonated as the messages were warm, personalized, and thoughtful. But School B decisively pulled ahead by leading the recipient to respond by asking a simple question. That prompted engagement... and started a conversation.

Starting and maintaining that conversation is crucial.

Buying Better Leads

Many schools invest significant time and marketing budget to attract inbound leads. However, buying leads can sometimes be a quicker solution.

We can sum up the biggest issue with that approach in one word: *Quality*.

The trick is to choose an aggregator that does a little extra... and does it specifically with your school in mind. They **pre-qualify** leads according to their loan eligibility, or pre-engage them by providing information about your school, or any other "prime the pump" strategies that generate interest and develops intent data. If you want a list, it's in your interest to get one that's unique to you, populated by leads who already know what unique benefits you can offer them.

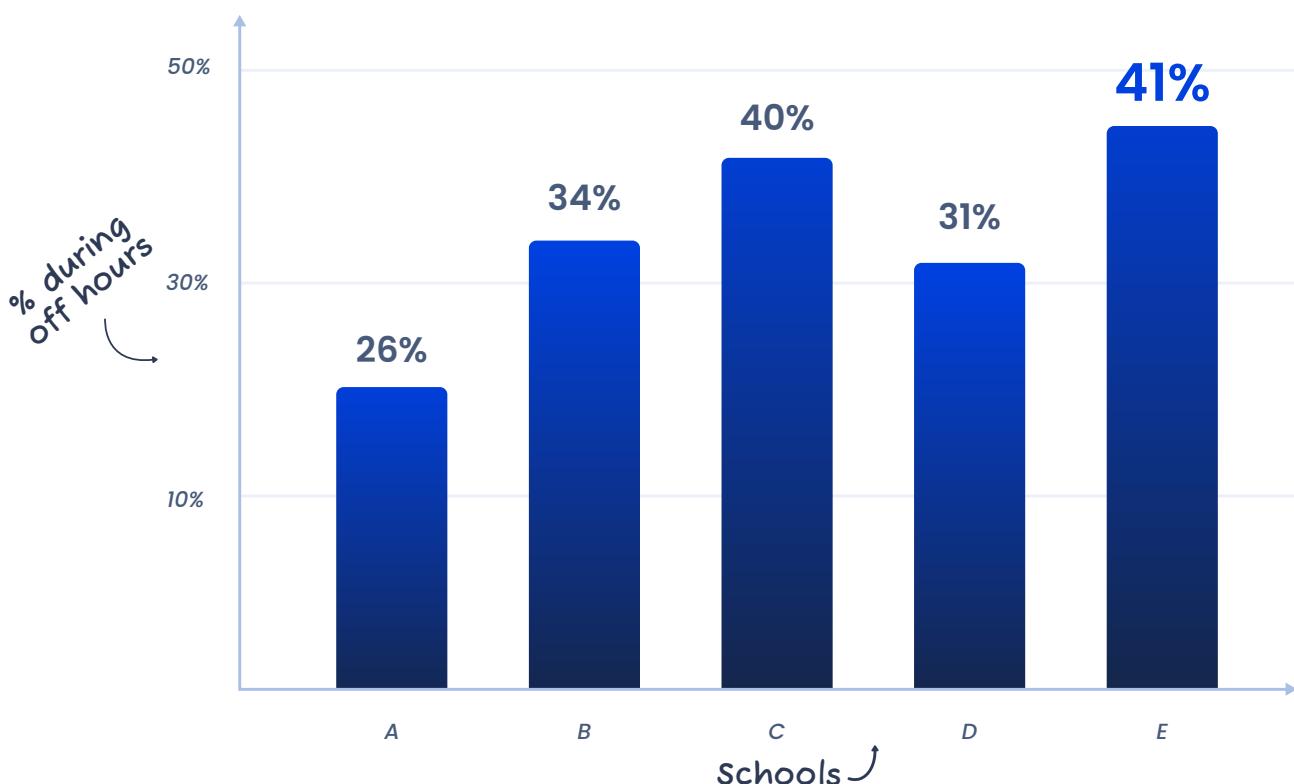
That's quality worth paying for. But organic traffic shouldn't be discounted, and schools should ideally spend more time building their organic lead inflow.

Off-Hour Leads

There's an old saying about meeting your audience where they are. Equally important (but less well publicized) is meeting them *when* they are.

We tend to assume that working hours are the busiest times for lead arrival, and

that's essentially correct. But if we calculate the total leads that arrive during working hours vs non-working hours for our five schools, a much more interesting picture develops.



The ranges vary, but a significant portion of leads (between 1/4th and 2/5ths) arrive during non-working hours. There might be a lot of reasons for this – kids stay up late, they have more time for research over the weekends – but the expectations remain the same. They'll be waiting for a response.

And as we've already established, the first school to start that conversation has a significant advantage over their competition. The fact that it's not a typical workday (or even a day at all) doesn't enter into that calculation.

The schools that implement a better contact strategy for those off-hour leads will win.

Right now, there are two solutions for approaching this:

- Onboarding a 24/7 call center
- Leverage technology and automation

Let's talk about those in more depth.

Onboarding an External Call Center

Bad news first: Quality call centers that can reach out quickly on weekends, with relevant information about your school, presented by a knowledgeable rep, are tough to find. When you do find them, their services are priced proportionally to that higher quality. Smaller institutions with tighter budgets generally have to either settle for something less effective or skip to the next option.

But if you have the budget, a good call center can be very useful indeed. We spoke to schools who reduced their speed-to-lead to just 15 seconds by establishing a very efficient call center strategy. That also increased their first contact rates to well over the 50-60% benchmark that most schools aspire to. For starters, call centers significantly reduce the burden on your in-house reps and give them more time to build a rapport with your prospects, in-person or otherwise.

According to studies conducted by a former admissions director in our sample groups, the leads-to-enrollment ratio is highest when a rep is working with a maximum of 27 leads a week.

Beyond that, the ratio drops. Reps just can't spend the requisite amount of time building a relationship with prospects when their workload stretches their availability too thin. Also, speed-to-lead tends to be much higher for schools with call centers. First-contact rates are higher, and of course, that call center can be around when your reps aren't.

That doesn't necessarily translate to higher admissions rates though – quality of leads is still a major factor there, and call centers often trade quality for volume – they can excel when the lead volumes are high, and lead sources are inorganic. When lead sources trend towards organic, good-quality leads, call centers are more of a valuable backup to your in-house reps to make sure nobody's so overloaded that conversions start going down.

So, when thinking about using a call center, look at your lead-generation strategy first and see if it fits with what call centers do

58%

of schools have an inquiry-to-appointment show rate below 30%

best. Regardless, quality control and reporting from your call-center partner can be a bit murky, and you'll need to be both vigilant and proactive to make sure your metrics stay in line with your expectations... and with what you're paying for the service.

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“We've got 24/7 support for inbound calls. Also, our reps are trained to handle both inbound and outbound calls. We make sure there is always someone present to answer any question the student might have.”

– Jennifer McDermott

Vice President, Contact Center, Ancora Education



Leveraging Technology and Automation

It's tough to beat a computer when it comes to speed.

The tricky part is getting that computer to take valuable, meaningful action on your behalf in a consistent way. As an easy example, remember those first-contact text messages we showed you earlier? With the right inputs captured by a query form, any of them could've been automatically sent from a CRM, without any human interaction. And indeed, a few of them were.

That's not limited to text messaging, either. **Auto-dialers and chatbots** also play a strong role in reducing speed-to-lead times. And a robust **CRM** can integrate all of that and more.

That's where good implementation comes in. Customer Relationship Management (CRM) software can automate that process so the touchpoints that don't need human intervention can go full speed ahead, while the moments that do need a personal touch never fall through the cracks. Those first-contact texts could be set

to go out in that critical five-minute window after the prospect completes a form – well before the rep gets involved. But it also automatically routes that prospect into the rep's contact queue, so Eno or Samuel or Patrick can get involved if the prospect engages... by answering that "How long have you been thinking about a career in this industry?" question, for example.

CRMs can be a cheaper solution to implement, they afford more direct control over your implementation, and give you far better access to metrics and reporting. There are also emerging technologies like A.I. that are still being figured out.

The downside is it can take a while to get your CRM implementation to where you need it to be. And while some are budget-friendly, others might require hiring specially trained admins to run them. There are also CRMs that are developed more with B2B interactions in mind, rather than the B2C approach that a school needs.

But with a good implementation in place, odds are you'll beat any other school to your prospects. Unless they have a good CRM, too.

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“Career Schools need a CRM that has a seamless experience with their SIS... it should also have strong marketing automation tools. They should also be able to track speed-to-lead through robust reporting.”

– Rustam Irani

President, RGI Marketing and Consulting



Improving the Student Experience

In all our conversations, one common theme became evident: ***Even in a group of schools with similar coursework and offerings, the admission***

numbers were heavily influenced by the prospects' initial experience.

In fact, students are willing to travel much further to attend a school just because they have built better relationships with their counselor.

During our interviews, we found one example where multiple students chose the more expensive school, located further away, despite four other options with similar programs in the area. Their reason? That one school gave them a superior first-contact experience.

Of course, the actual school experience has to measure up to that initial impression if you want higher retention and good word-of-mouth. But a fast, responsive, warm, personalized, inquisitive outreach makes a real difference when it comes to getting them in the door. Nobody wants to feel like they're being fed into a machine. Cold, impersonal outreach will be met with a cold, indifferent response. Conversely, people want to like the brands they associate with, whether it's the shoes they wear, the phone they carry, or the school they attend.

And that first experience creates your brand in their mind.

— “

“I always say, when it comes to speed to lead, it's not the first school who reaches the student. It's about the first school who makes the connection with the student.”

– Kathy Belletty
Host, EdUp Edge Podcast



Conclusion

The power of first contact is paramount when it comes to career school admissions, and the quality of that first contact is just as important as speed-to-lead. Every element of that initial outreach leaves an indelible mark. Creating those quality touchpoints often determines how long the prospect interacts with their rep... and the longer that interaction, the greater the likelihood of conversion. And while there are plenty of options in how you initiate that first conversation, it's the process you implement that will ultimately win or lose the day.

LeadSquared

Trusted by over 2000 institutions worldwide, LeadSquared is the cutting-edge student management platform designed to streamline admissions and boost marketing efforts for career education. Our fully customizable CRM and FloStack personalization software, A.I. chatbots, and auto-dialer systems help schools improve lead management, automate communication, and student engagement with data-driven insights. Easy to implement and integrate with existing systems, LeadSquared empowers institutions to efficiently manage the entire student journey, from prospect to graduate.

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[Click here to improve contact rates with personalized student journeys](#)