vital.

21

MISTAKES

Higher Ed Marketers Make with Paid Ads

(And How to Fix Them)
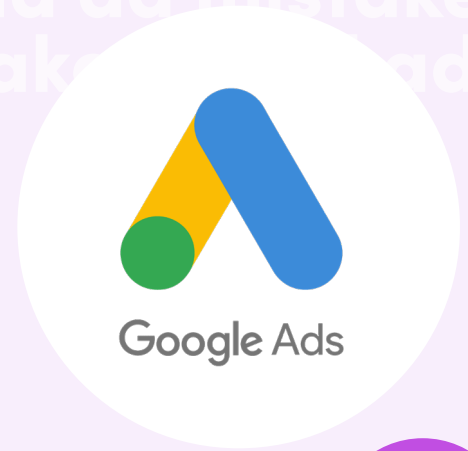
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INTRODUCTION

Don't Freak Out.

But if your higher education institution is running paid digital ad campaigns, chances are — you're doing it wrong.

It's Not Your Fault.

This stuff is complicated. Even the vast majority of marketing agencies don't understand how to use today's sophisticated strategies to get the right messages in front of the right prospective students at the right time.

That's because institutional and agency marketers alike find themselves stuck in the old way of running paid ads — back when all you had to do was focus on one or two platforms and run some brand awareness and action campaigns to see results.

Times Have Changed.

Paid advertising is more expensive and competitive than ever. Nowadays, it takes deep expertise in both higher education and the increasingly technical intricacies of paid advertising strategy to get the clicks and conversions you need to meet your enrollment goals. That's why we analyzed data from some of higher ed's biggest digital advertising spenders and compared it to our own roster of successful clients to uncover exactly what most marketers are getting wrong.

We found not one, not two, but 21 common mistakes higher ed marketers make when it comes to running paid digital advertising campaigns. We've collected them all in this eBook. And to make it worth the read, we'll tell you what's at stake with each critical misstep — and most importantly, how to fix them.

Let's Get Started.

Google Search Ads

The seven common mistakes higher ed marketers make
on the world's largest digital advertising platform

Google Ads

If you've done any kind of paid digital advertising for higher ed, you've
probably run Google Search Ads. Maybe you're running them now — or
maybe you've hit pause out of frustration with the high cost-per-click and low-
quality leads that are all too common with old-school strategies and tactics.

Find and fix your Google Search Ads mistakes, and you can feel confident
that your ad dollars are directly contributing to increased awareness, traffic,
applications, and right-fit enrollments.

⚠ **GOOGLE SEARCH ADS MISTAKE #1**

Ignoring Long-Tail Keywords

The Mistake
Focusing solely on broad, competitive keywords (e.g.
"law schools") while neglecting long-tail keywords that
prospective students search for at different stages in
their enrollment journey (e.g. "how to become an
environmental lawyer").

A long-tail keyword is:

- At least 3-5 words long
- Highly specific
- Lower search volume
- Less competitive

Why It Matters
Long-tail keywords tell us a lot about what a searcher is really looking for, as
well as where they are in their higher education decision-making process.
That makes it much easier to deliver relevant, valuable content — leading to
higher conversion rates and a lower cost-per-click.

How to Fix It

Review your search term report in Google Ads to identify the proportion of long-tail to broad keywords. Check the conversion rates and cost-per-clicks for each term, and adjust your strategy to incorporate more long-tail keywords that align with your institution's offerings.

⚠ **Google Search Ads Mistake #2**
Neglecting Negative Keywords

The Mistake

Failing to consistently implement a robust negative keyword strategy, leading to wasted ad spend on irrelevant clicks.

Why It Matters

Regularly updating negative keywords can significantly improve campaign efficiency and lead quality by filtering out non-converting traffic.

A **negative keyword** is any keyword you want to exclude from your paid search criteria. When you select negative keywords, your ads won't be shown to people searching for those terms.

How to Fix It

Analyze your search terms report to identify any irrelevant queries that triggered your ads. Add these as negative keywords and monitor changes in your campaign's cost-per-click and conversion rate.

⚠ **Google Search Ads Mistake #3**
Overlooking Ad Extensions

Ad extensions are pieces of additional information that can be included in a Google Search Ad, such as images or site links.

Ad extensions only appear if:

- ✔ Google approves them
- ✔ Your ads rank is high enough
- ✔ Google Ads predicts that they'll improve your ad's performance

The Mistake

Not utilizing ad extensions such as site links, callouts, structured snippets, etc. to provide additional context and increase click-through rates.

Why It Matters

Ad extensions enhance visibility and provide more opportunities for prospective students to engage with your institution's content.

How to Fix It

Review your ad extensions performance report to ensure you're using all available extensions. Assess which extensions drive the highest click-through-rate and adjust your ad strategy accordingly.

Not Scheduling Your Ads

The Mistake

Running ads 24/7 without considering the times and days that generate the highest-quality conversions for your institution.

Ad scheduling allows you to control when your ads will be shown (and when they won't).

Why It Matters

Without manual intervention, Google will spread your ad spend evenly throughout the whole day. Optimizing your ad schedule based on when prospective students are most active can improve your ad spend efficiency and increase conversions. On the contrary, unscheduled ads can lead to low-quality clicks during times when your audience isn't likely to be engaged — or even online.

How to Fix It

Analyze the "Day & Hour" report in Google Ads to identify when your ads perform best. Adjust your ad schedule to focus on peak times, and monitor the impact on your campaign's performance.

Over-spending on Your Own Branded Keywords

The Mistake

It seems obvious to spend a hefty portion of your ad budget on branded keywords. After all, if prospective students are searching for you by name, they're probably going to end up applying and enrolling at a higher rate...right? Probably. But over-investing in branded keywords can lead you to miss out on high-intent searches that are a great match for your institution — even if they're not familiar with you yet.

Why It Matters

While branded keywords often have a lower cost-per-click, non-branded keywords can attract prospective students who are still in the consideration phase, expanding your reach. Also, as long as your search engine optimization (SEO) game is tight and your competitors aren't aggressively bidding on your branded keywords, you're probably going to get most of those direct searchers anyway.

Branded keywords are keywords that contain the name of your higher ed institution.

University

University Degree

University Abroad

University Student

University Online

University Schedule

How to Fix It

Compare the performance of branded vs. non-branded keywords in terms of conversion rate, cost-per-acquisition (CPA), and return on ad spend (ROAS). Adjust your budget allocation to strike a balance between branded and non-branded keyword investment. You should also take a look at whether your competitors are bidding on your branded keywords. If they are, you will likely need to keep running some branded campaigns. If not, turn down that lever and measure the impact on overall site traffic and conversions. You may not see any difference — but keep a close eye on things in case conditions change.

Investing Too Much in Performance Max Campaigns

With Performance Max campaigns, you provide multiple versions of ad copy and assets and set campaign goals (e.g. maximize conversions or minimize cost-per-click). Google uses AI to dynamically decide what assets to show on what platforms to what audiences. In theory, this leads to optimized performance and a wider reach.

The Mistake

Relying heavily on Performance Max campaigns as a relatively easy way to leverage AI to manage ad placements across the entire Google advertising network, while neglecting the importance of human expertise and oversight.

Why It Matters

Performance Max campaigns can be powerful in the right context, but you're extremely limited in your ability to optimize, control, and even analyze and learn from the success (or failure) of your campaigns. Google will spend the campaign's full budget more often and reach past your designated audience, opening the door to wasted spend on low-quality traffic. This makes it difficult to optimize for specific outcomes relevant to higher ed institutions.

How to Fix It

Review the performance of your Performance Max campaigns against traditional Search campaigns. Analyze metrics like conversion rates, CPA, and ROAS. Consider running parallel campaigns to compare results and determine if additional manual optimizations could yield better outcomes.

Relying heavily on Performance Max campaigns as a relatively easy way to leverage AI.

Not Testing Smart Bidding Strategies

The Mistake

We see higher ed marketers making one of two possible mistakes when it comes to Smart Bidding. Either you stick to manual bidding only, or you go all-in with Smart Bidding without testing it against manual approaches. Both mistakes can end up delivering disappointing results.

Why It Matters

Smart Bidding strategies, such as Target Cost-Per-Action, use machine learning to adjust bids in real-time, potentially improving campaign efficiency. At the same time, we've seen our higher ed paid advertising experts find brilliantly creative ways to outperform the Google machine. You never know unless you try.

How to Fix It

A/B test a Smart Bidding strategy against your current manual bidding approach. Monitor performance metrics such as CPA and conversion rate to determine if the automated strategy provides better results.

Google Smart Bidding uses machine learning to automatically optimize bids in real time for a specific goal, such as:

- Target cost-per-action (TCPA)
- Maximize conversions
- Maximize conversion value

$5 Bid

$20 Bid

$35
Target CPA

$10 Bid

Paid Social Media Ads

The seven common mistakes higher ed marketers make when running paid ads on social media platforms such as Instagram, LinkedIn, and TikTok.

As higher education marketing continues to evolve, social media ads have become indispensable for higher education recruitment and brand building. The reason is fairly obvious: the majority of Americans uses some sort of social media in their everyday lives — with about 75% of adults under 30 visiting at least five social media platforms regularly.*

While Google Ads often yield higher conversion rates, social media advertising is where universities have the potential to resonate and stay top-of-mind, especially since your audience is already heavily present there. But because people use social media for completely different reasons (and in completely different ways) than Google, you need a completely different advertising strategy to make an impact.

What's more, each platform requires its own approach. Whether you're targeting working professionals on LinkedIn or high school students on TikTok, fixing these common social media advertising mistakes will help ensure that your campaigns meet your goals.

75%
ADULTS UNDER 30
are visiting at least five social media platforms regularly.*

There are roughly seven types of ads you can use across most social media platforms:

- Images
- Videos
- Carousels
- Collections
- Stories
- Messaging

Sticking to Just One Platform

What percentage of U.S. adults use each platform?*

Platform	All adults	Adults under 30
Youtube	83%	93%
Facebook	68%	67%
Instagram	47%	78%
Pinterest	35%	45%
TikTok	33%	62%
LinkedIn	30%	32%
Snapchat	27%	65%

The Mistake

Focusing too heavily on a single platform (e.g., Facebook) while ignoring others like Instagram, TikTok, or LinkedIn.

Why It Matters

While we often advise our clients to master one platform at a time, your longterm strategy should include advertising on all platforms where your audience is active. Diversifying ad spend across platforms allows you to reach different segments of your audience with targeted messages and creative approaches.

How to Fix It

Review your social media ad spend allocation and performance metrics across platforms. Identify platforms with underutilized potential and consider reallocating your budget to test their effectiveness.

Source: Pew Research Center

# One-size-fits-all Creative

The Mistake
Using the same creative assets across all social platforms without tailoring them to each platform's unique audience and format.

Why It Matters
Customizing creative to fit the format and audience of each platform can significantly increase engagement rates.

How to Fix It
Analyze engagement rates (likes, shares, comments) and CTR for ads on each platform. Compare the performance of platform-specific creative against reused assets and refine your creative approach based on the results. You'll likely find that professional, polished content works better on some platforms, whereas more authentic, real-life content performs better on others.
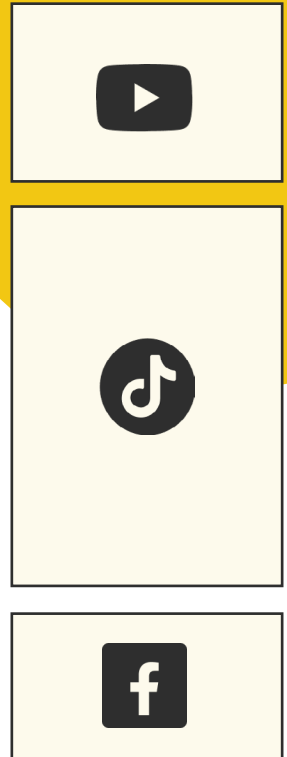
Neglecting Lookalike Audiences

Lookalikes are groups of social media users identified by the platform as sharing similar characteristics and interests with your existing students and/or your specific target audience.

The Mistake
Not leveraging lookalike audiences to expand your reach to users similar to your current student base.

Why It Matters
Lookalike audiences help you target high-potential prospects who share characteristics with your existing students, increasing the likelihood of conversion.

How to Fix It

Set up a lookalike audience based on your best-performing student segments. Monitor the performance of campaigns targeting lookalike audiences in terms of click-through-rate, conversion rate, and cost-per-acquisition.


Not Using Video Content

The Mistake

Relying solely on static images or text ads while neglecting the impact of video content, which tends to have higher engagement rates.

Why It Matters

Video ads can effectively showcase campus life, student testimonials, and unique program offerings, making them highly persuasive for prospective students.

60%
OF SOCIAL MEDIA TIME

U.S. adults spend over 60% of their social media time watching videos — and that's not even counting YouTube.*

How to Fix It

Review your current ad formats and assess the proportion of video content. Compare the engagement and conversion rates of video ads versus static ads, and adjust your content strategy accordingly. Not sure where to start? Get inspiration from video content created by your current students, faculty, and alumni.
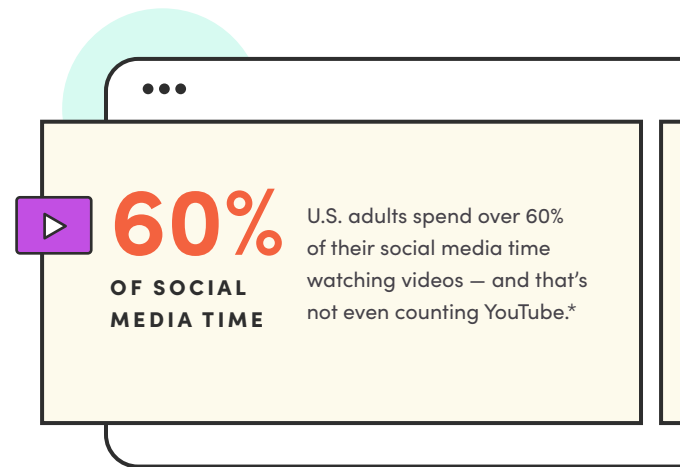
Not Testing Variations of Ad Creative

A/B Testing lets you compare two versions of an ad strategy by changing variables such as ad images, ad text, audience, or placement.

The Mistake

Running a single creative variation without testing multiple versions to see which resonates best with your audience.

Why It Matters

A/B testing different ad creatives by changing just one variable at a time (such as CTA button color, image, headline, etc.) can reveal what visuals, messages, and formats drive the highest engagement and conversion rates.

How to Fix It

Set up A/B tests for different creative variations across your campaigns. Use the platform's analytics tools to compare performance metrics and identify the most effective ad creatives for scaling.

⚠ **S o c i a l   M e d i a   A d v e r t i s i n g   M i s t a k e   # 6**

Not Excluding Audiences

The Mistake

Failing to exclude irrelevant or already converted audiences, leading to wasted ad spend and potential audience fatigue.

Why It Matters

Audience exclusions help you avoid targeting users who are not likely to convert, optimizing your ad spend and reducing the risk of ad fatigue.

How to Fix It

Review your audience targeting settings and ensure that exclusions are in place for converters, irrelevant segments, and low-intent users. Monitor changes in cost-per-acquisition and conversion rates after implementing exclusions.
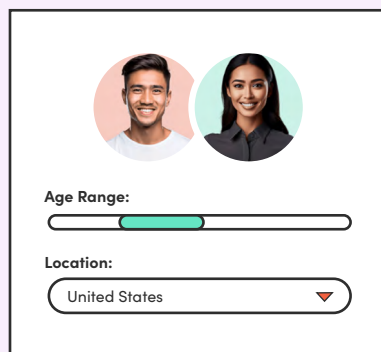
Audience exclusions in social media advertising work similarly to negative keywords in Google Search Ads by allowing you to choose characteristics of audiences (such as location or age range) that you don't want to advertise to.

Underestimating the Power of Retargeting

The Mistake

Not setting up retargeting campaigns to reach users who have previously engaged with your content but did not convert. Note that effective retargeting isn't as simple as following users around with the same ads, hoping to eventually wear them down. We cover common mistakes higher ed marketers make with retargeting ads in the next section of this eBook.

Why It Matters

Retargeting allows you to stay top-of-mind for prospects who are in the consideration phase, increasing the chances of conversion. It can be helpful to think of retargeting as a form of lead nurture. A well-designed retargeting campaign will deliver ad content specific to the prospects' decision-making phase.

How to Fix It

Review your retargeting campaign performance, focusing on metrics such as click-through-rate and conversion rate. Ensure your retargeting efforts are segmented and personalized based on user behavior.

Retargeting:
Retargeting lets you show specific ads to people who have already engaged with your institution in some way but haven't taken action.

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Retargeting Ads

The seven common mistakes higher ed marketers
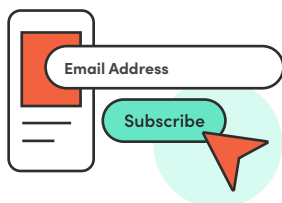make with retargeting ads

The terms "remarketing" and "retargeting" are often used interchangeably,
but they're not quite the same, and each requires its own strategy.

For this eBook's purposes, we are going to focus on retargeting. As you can
imagine, retargeting requires quite a bit of savvy and creativity to avoid
annoying people with ads that feel repetitive or irrelevant to their decision-
making stage.

**No worries. Fixing seven common retargeting mistakes will help
ensure that you get the most out of this valuable audience.**

Remarketing refers to marketing to people
who have visited your site and taken some kind
of conversion action, such as downloading
a resource, taking a virtual campus tour, or
requesting information. Remarketing can include
paid advertising, but it also covers a whole range
of other lead-nurturing activities such as emails
and phone calls.

Retargeting is the practice of advertising to
audiences who have engaged with your ads
or visited your site but have not yet converted.
Because you don't have these folks' contact info
yet, paid retargeting ads are a must to nudge
them towards taking action.

⚠ **Retargeting Mistake #1**

Using Generic Messaging

The Mistake

Serving generic ads to retargeting audiences rather than customizing the message based on their profiles (such as demographics and interests) and behaviors (such as previous interactions with your ads or program pages visited). Most higher ed marketers understand the value of segmenting their remarketing lists — once a prospect has given you their contact information and they're in your CRM, it's relatively obvious that you should market to them differently based on what stage of the funnel they're in. But you can (and should) segment retargeting audiences as well, and create personalized ads based on that segmentation.
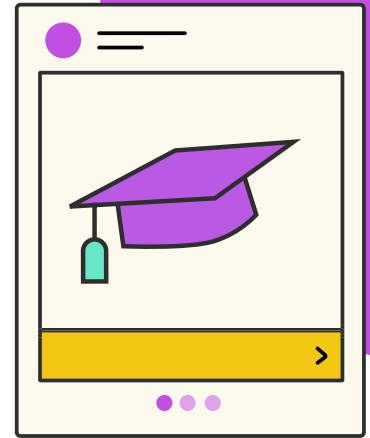
Why It Matters

Personalized retargeting ads can significantly boost conversion rates by addressing your prospective students' specific interests and needs. By segmenting your retargeting audience based on demographics, interests, or pages visited, you can deliver more relevant ads to nurture them towards conversion.

How to Fix It

Review your audience segments and ensure that you're creating distinct lists based on profile and user actions. Then, take a look at your current retargeting ad copy and creative assets. Analyze the performance of segmented campaigns versus general ones, and compare the performance of ads that are specific to your audience's previous behavior versus generic ones by analyzing metrics such as click-through rates and conversion rates. Adjust your segmentation strategy to optimize results. Implement more tailored messaging if you notice lower engagement with generic ads.

⚠ **Retargeting Mistake #2**

Using Only Static Retargeting Ads

The Mistake

Not using dynamic retargeting to serve highly personalized ads based on

the user's specific interactions with your site (e.g., specific programs viewed or courses explored). This is a similar concept to static personalization of ad content via audience segmentation, but it takes it a step further by, for example, automatically pulling specific program information into an ad.

Why It Matters

Dynamic retargeting increases relevance and conversion rates by showcasing the exact content your prospect is interested in, making the ad more compelling and personalized. You can get part of the way there by creating a range of static retargeting ads for different audience segments (as we mentioned above), but dynamic retargeting lets you get even more granular with less manual effort.

How to Fix It

Evaluate your current retargeting strategy to see if you're running dynamic ads. Compare the performance of dynamic remarketing ads against static ones by analyzing click-through-rates, conversion rates, and ROAS. If you haven't started using dynamic ads yet, give them a try and monitor the improvement in engagement.


Retargeting Mistake #3

Showing Retargeting Ads for Too Long (or Not Long Enough)

The Mistake

Using overly broad time frames for retargeting can lead to ad fatigue and diminishing returns as prospective students see the same ads too often over an extended period. On the other hand, stopping your ads too early might mean losing touch with a prospective student before they finish deciding where they want to apply.

Why It Matters

Adjusting retargeting windows to match the typical decision-making process of prospective students ensures your ads remain relevant and timely while being mindful of the sometimes lengthy higher ed search process.
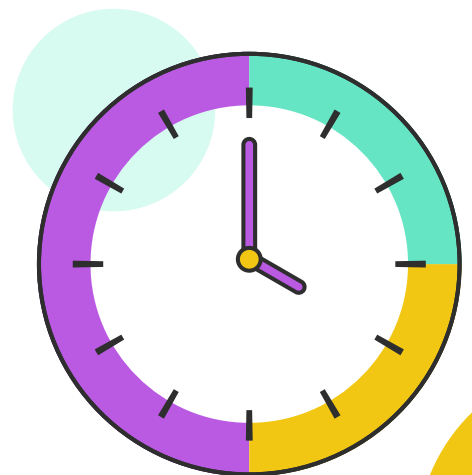
How to Fix It

Examine your campaign settings to identify the duration of your retargeting windows. Experiment with different time frames (e.g., 7 days vs. 30 days vs. a year) and monitor the impact on click-through-rate, conversion rates, and return on ad spend (ROAS). Adjust the windows to optimize performance.

⚠ **Retargeting Mistake #4**

Showing Retargeting Ads Too Often

The Mistake

Not setting ad frequency caps, leading to oversaturation of ads and potential negative sentiment as users become annoyed by seeing the same ad too often.

Why It Matters

This mistake is similar to mistake #3, but it requires a different fix. Implementing frequency caps helps prevent ad fatigue, ensuring that your remarketing efforts remain effective without overwhelming your audience. We find that 3-5 impressions of the same ad is a good sweet spot.

How to Fix It

Review your campaign settings to see if frequency caps are in place. Analyze the performance of ads that have high frequency rates by looking at click-through-rate, conversion rates, and bounce rates. Adjust your frequency caps as needed to maintain optimal engagement levels.

⚠ **Retargeting Mistake #5**

Failing to Exclude Converters

The Mistake

Showing ads to users who have already converted, leading to wasted ad spend and potential irritation, which can negatively impact your institution's brand perception.
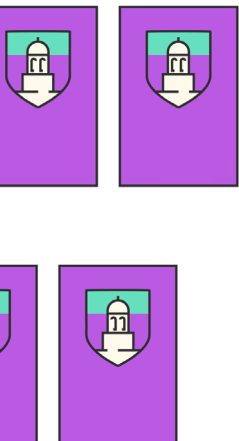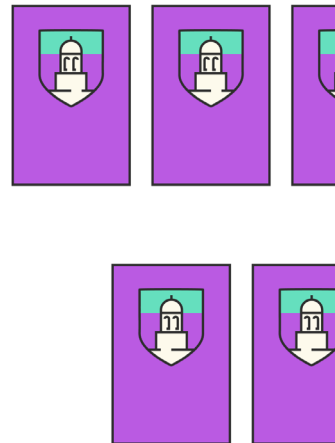
Why It Matters

Excluding converters from retargeting lists ensures that your budget is spent on engaging new prospects or nurturing leads still in the decision phase, making your campaigns more cost-effective. Once a prospective student takes a conversion action and gives you their contact information, they should be put into a tailored remarketing funnel. It seems obvious, but you'd be surprised how easy it is to accidentally continue to show ads encouraging a conversion that a prospect has already taken.

How to Fix It

Check your audience exclusions in your campaign settings to ensure converters are being properly excluded. Review your analytics to verify that your ads aren't being served to prospective students who have already taken the desired action (e.g., request information or apply).

Retargeting Mistake #6

# Only Retargeting on One Platform

The Mistake

Keeping your retargeting ads siloed to a single platform, missing the chance to re-engage prospective students as they move around online.

Why It Matters

Remember when we told you that 75% of adults under 30 are active on at least five social media platforms? If you're running paid ads on all the platforms where your ideal students hang out, that's great. It's even better to run cross-platform retargeting campaigns so the ads they see are personalized and consistent.

How to Fix It

Use platform-specific features or a dedicated retargeting tool to sync your retargeting lists and deliver consistent ads across different channels like Google Ads, Facebook, and Instagram, ensuring the same prospective student is targeted with relevant messaging regardless of where they are browsing.

480 x 60

1080 x 1080

1080 x 1350

18
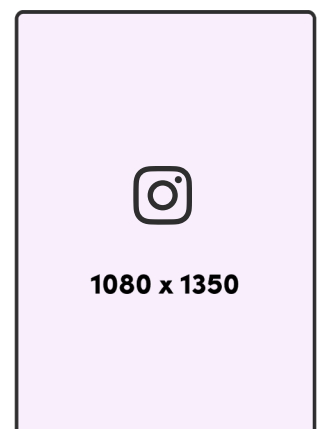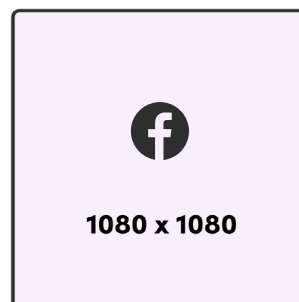
# Sticking to One Device Type

The Mistake
Failing to set up cross-device retargeting, which misses opportunities to re-engage prospects across different devices as they move from research to decision-making stages.

Why It Matters
Cross-device retargeting ensures a cohesive experience, allowing you to reach your future students on their preferred device at the right time, enhancing the chances of conversion.

How to Fix It
Check your campaign settings to see if cross-device tracking and retargeting are enabled. Analyze user behavior data to identify how many conversions involve multiple devices. Implement cross-device retargeting strategies and monitor changes in conversion rates and overall campaign performance.
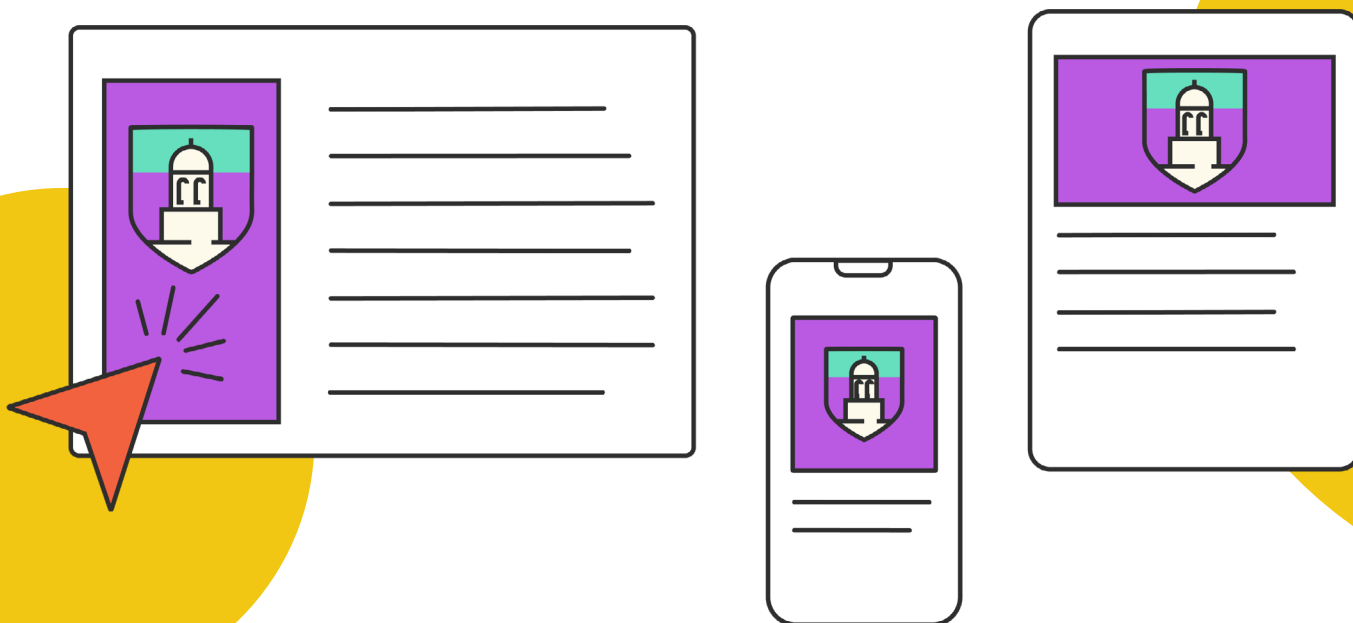
Still With Us?

Great. Let's get to work.

If you've been making any (or all!) of these paid advertising mistakes at your institution, you're probably wondering what to do next. Instead of trying to fix everything at once, make a list of "now" problems that need to be fixed immediately (for example, excluding geographical regions that you don't serve). Longer-term initiatives, like refining your keyword lists and creating personalized ad assets, will require a game plan, including benchmarking KPIs and setting up regular reporting.

Need help diagnosing and fixing your paid ad strategy? We got you. Our team of experienced higher education paid advertising specialists will conduct a thorough audit of your campaigns and deliver a detailed report including a recommended action plan.

Get Your Audit

Hi. We're Vital.

We're the full-service higher education marketing agency that puts more butts in seats by finding opportunities other agencies miss. It's a little bit magic. And a heckuva lot of expertise and hard work. Holler back.

Let's Talk