Adopting an inbound strategy

for your University.

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What is inbound?

What is inbound?

Inbound marketing is a marketing strategy which focuses on 'pulling' the students you want to attract directly to your website.

Inbound marketing is about creating value for your target audience by understanding their unique challenges and creating resources which help them overcome their obstacles - placing your brand firmly in their mind.

This also builds trust and authority by demonstrating expertise in a non-invasive, human way.

Inbound boosts your chances of students registering an interest and booking a place on an open day at a fraction of the cost of traditional methods.

The inbound philosophy is all about understanding your audience so you can serve them with the right content at the right time and in the right way.

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Inbound vs outbound.

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Inbound vs outbound

Inbound replaces traditional methods - print ads, tv ads, cold emails, and flyers - with tactics to attract and engage the right prospective students who are **already looking** for the things your university offers.

While outbound methods 'push' your message in front of a large and often unqualified audience, inbound marketing aims to 'pull' the right potential students to your site, making it easier and less costly to engage with them.

You can **read our comprehensive inbound vs outbound guide here.**

"Your site visitors are humans, not numbers on a screen. They have unique needs, challenges and goals - the questions is, are your marketing channels providing the answers they are looking for?"

Matt Johnson
Inbound Strategist, Contra

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Inbound benefits.

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Inbound benefits.

Content is evergreen: If you follow the inbound methodology when creating content, your efforts now will be rewarded for years to come.

Builds brand awareness and brand authority: By creating content based on the requirements of your **student personas**, you will attract the right audience to your site - whether that's prospective students, corporate event customers, parents or top professors looking for a new job. You become an authoritative source of information for potential students.

Simplifies the job of recruitment, marketing and admissions. The inbound methodology strategically aligns departments by placing personas at the heart of all activities. It also utilises the strengths of each department to improve overall student acquisition strategies.

Generates traffic and quality leads: Marketing and recruitment content that is personalised, targeted and genuinely helpful will drive more traffic and quality leads (prospective students) to your site.

Read more about inbound marketing benefits here.

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The student journey.

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The student journey.

Potential students for your university will all have different needs, and each of them will go on slightly different journeys before applying.

Generally, students will pass through three stages on the way to applying to your university or college: awareness, consideration, decision.

Awareness stage

— The prospective student is considering whether university is right for them. They are doing some research to see what's out there; which courses interest them, what they might want to do post-uni and where they would fit in. They know there's a lot to get their head around so they want to gain clarity, calm their anxieties and feel confident about progressing with the decision-making process.

Consideration stage

— The student now has a clearer idea of the course(s) they are interested in and is committed to researching and understanding all of the steps needed to get them to the right university for them.

Decision stage

— The student has decided on their course and is compiling a list of all available colleges/universities to help. They will ultimately whittle it down to a handful and make a decision based on emotional, rational and reputational factors (grade dependent of course).

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Awareness content

- Blog posts
- Video
- Competitions
- News-related posts
- Infographics
- Student tip sheets
- Mythbusters
- Interactive games
- 'List of' posts
- Debate posts

Consideration content

- Guides
- Student case studies
- Survey & polls
- Testimonials
- Comparisons
- Award posts
- Slideshares
- Interviews with staff
- Student interviews
- Blogs from students
- Podcasts

Decision content

- Virtual open days
- Recruitment material
- Budget calculators
- FAQs
- Pricing guides
- Student living guides
- Local area guides
- Campus information
- Life on campus videos

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Student personas.

Student personas.

Student personas are fictional representations of your ideal student profiles.

… but if you are reading this, you already know that.

They help marketing, recruitment and admissions operate more effectively and fill more places using targeted content as a recruitment tool.

Creating generalised student personas will help your institution produce marketing material that truly resonates with its prospective students. It also enables admissions to help prospects overcome hesitations using generalised character information.

The best student personas are formed from a mixture of market research, insight gathered from existing students, and educated assumptions. There isn't a perfect number of personas but you want to keep them to a modest number.

Example Erin
Potential undergraduate.

Background & demographics:

Age: 17
Gender: Female
Location: UK
Education: Current A-Level student
Extra info: Low-income household

"Will I fit in?"

Goals
1. Find out about the university
2. See what college life is really like
3. Learn more about course-specific employability
4. To get a 1st so she has the best employment opportunities

Challenges
1. Comparing so many options
2. Worried about paying for everything

Resource requirements
1. Accomodation
2. Funding & grants
3. Why your university?
4. Campus location(s)
5. Social life

Decision-making process
1. Consult with parents
2. Talk to high school teachers
3. Look every university website she is interested in
4. Engage with social media
5. Make a list

Context
Erin is a potential undergraduate and considering which university to apply to. She is searching through London-based universities using blogs that list the best institutions in the city. She is concerned where she will live and how convenient the university will be. Grants and social facilities also are of interest. Erin is a millennial so she judges universities based on the site's content and its design. She is worried about making friends so wants to actually see how inclusive the university is before committing to an open day.

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Inbound recruitment methodology.

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Inbound recruitment methodology

The inbound recruitment methodology describes the steps your university goes through to get prospective students to choose your university over a competitor's.

The methodology opposes the traditional sales funnel which assumes once you have converted them, they simply fall out the bottom and you stop trying to woo them.

The inbound recruitment approach is represented by a flywheel (a device that stores rotational energy), meaning the more energy you feed it, the more powerful it becomes.

There's no 'falling out' of the flywheel. By continuing to offer value to people - visitors, leads, and current students - you're storing more energy to drive your University forward.

The inbound recruitment approach has 3 stages: attract, engage, and delight.
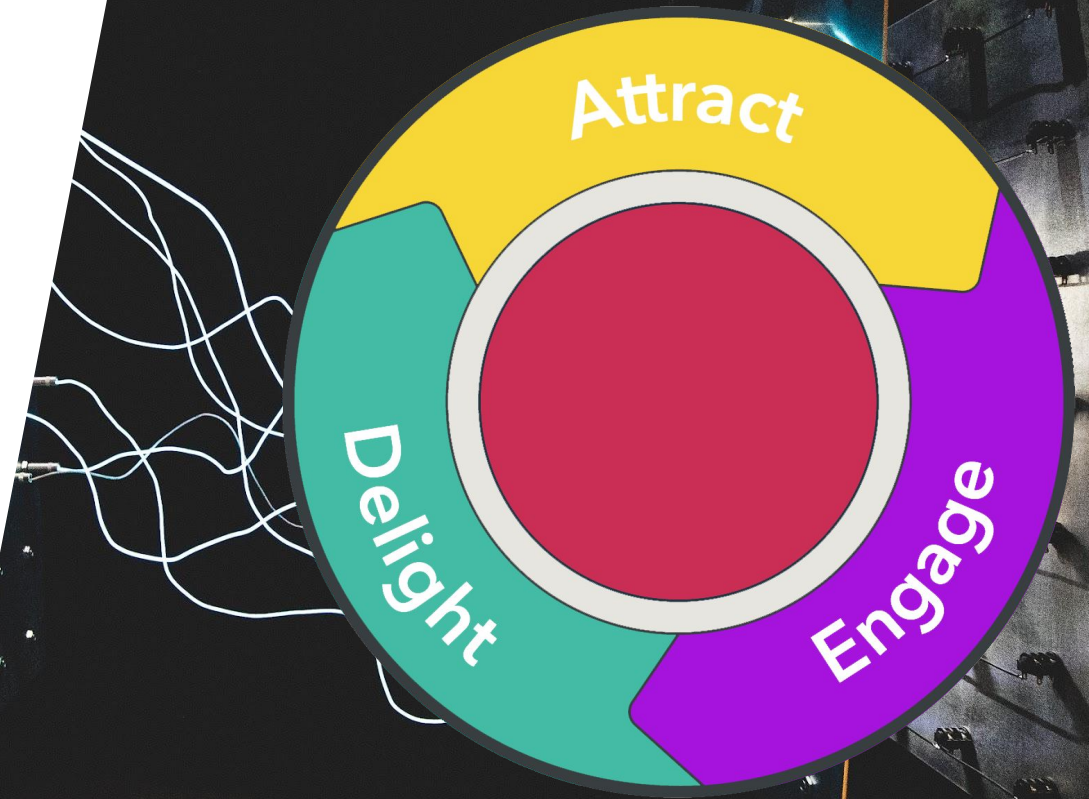
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Attract.

Content is at the heart of inbound marketing and drives organic traffic from the people you want on your site most.

To reach your audience, start by creating and publishing content — blog articles, downloadable guides, explainer videos, and testimonials from existing students about your University.

You should optimise all of this content with a well-researched SEO strategy. An SEO strategy will require you to target specific keywords and phrases related to the questions prospective students are looking for answers to.

By first understanding what the user is searching for and then creating content to solve those problems/speak to their concerns, you 'pull' the right audience to your site.

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Engage.

When using inbound strategies to engage your audience, ensure you're communicating and dealing with prospective students in a way that makes them want to find out more about you. When using these engagement strategies, inject information about the value your University will provide them with beyond the course.

Students want to find a community. They want to learn but they also want to fit in and make friends. Your content needs to **show** them your community, not just **tell** them about it.

It's not enough to say your University is X and Y. It's important that this message comes from the people your audience will connect with most - other students.

Consider setting up student podcasts, vlogs, interviews and Q&A blogs. Then encourage users to take action after consuming the content.
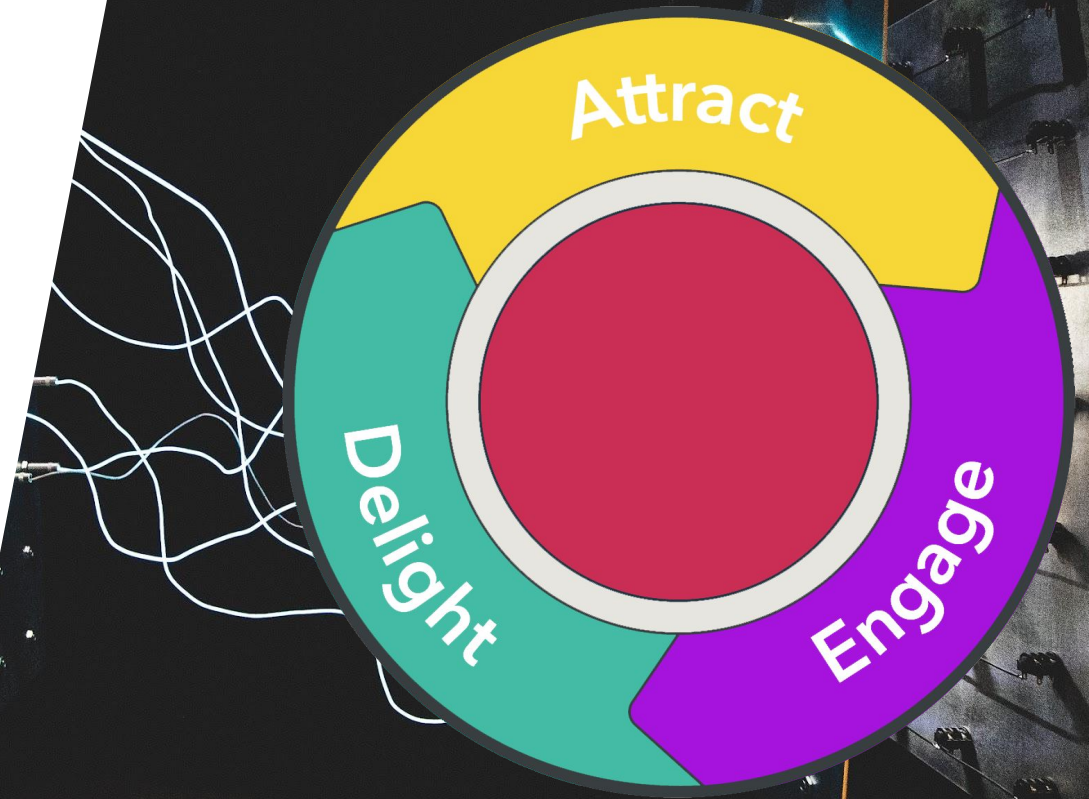

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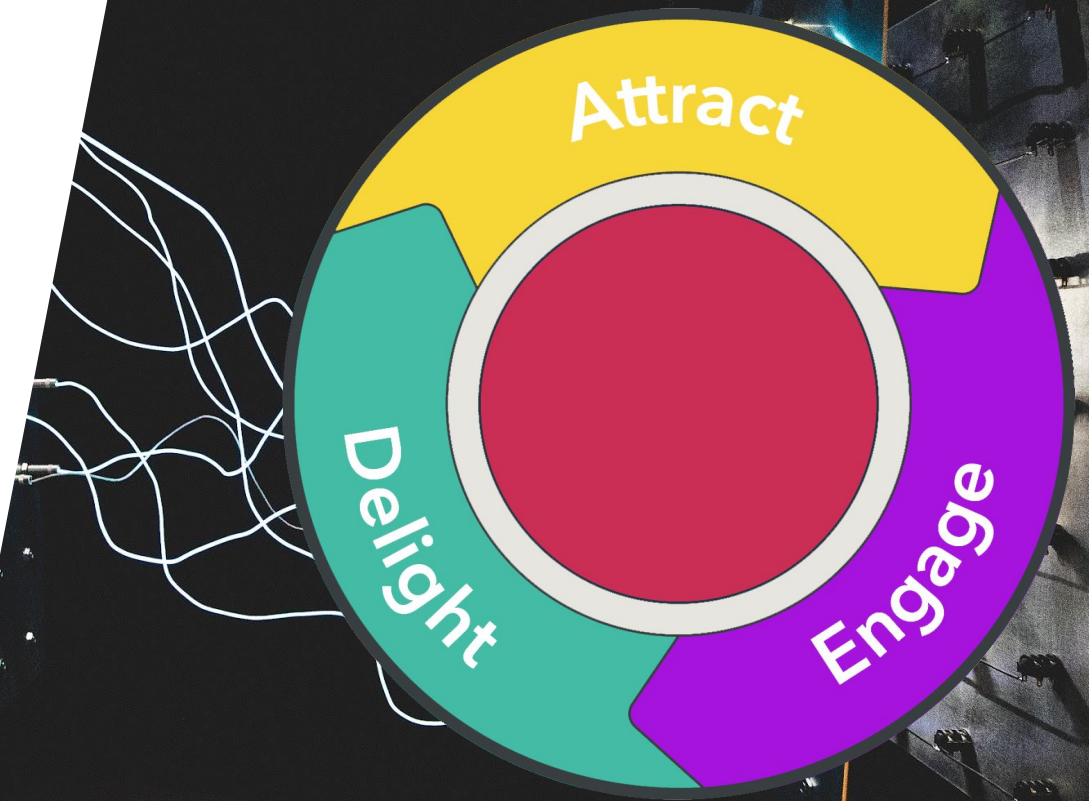
Delight.

Successful inbound strategies ensure your current community - admissions, professors, students, alumni, etc - are happy and involved too. Doing this increases the likelihood of creating a strong community - something we know prospective students are looking for.

Incorporating thoughtful surveys to assist, support, and request feedback from the current community is a great way to delight these people. Surveys should be shared at specific points in time to ensure they make sense and are of value.

Social media listening is another important strategy when it comes to delighting current students. Social media followers may use one of your profiles to provide feedback, ask questions, or share their experiences on campus. Respond to these interactions with information that helps, supports, and encourages other followers — this shows you hear and care about them.

Lastly, the mark of an inbound strategy focused on delighting current communities is one that assists and supports them in any situation, whether or not you get any value out of it. Remember, a delighted community member becomes an advocate and promoter, so handle all interactions, both big and small, with care.

Attract

Engage

Delight

Setting up an inbound campaign.

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Setting up an inbound campaign.

Pre-campaign planning.

There are several considerations when creating an inbound campaign which cannot be ignored if you're going to run a successful one. These are:

— **Content strategy:** is it optimised for SEO? Are you structuring your content around **topics and sub-topics**? Which content types will you use to reach and engage your target audience?
— **Lead flows:** How do you convert visitors to leads?
— **Dashboard reports:** How will you measure success? Which metrics will you track?
— **Student personas:** Who is the campaign targeted at?
— **Student's journey:** How does your campaign move leads through the student's journey (awareness, consideration, decision)?

Setting up an inbound campaign.

Campaign implementation.

Always test each component of your campaign to make sure they're working properly.

The tools you should consider using when implementing a campaign:

— Email
— Social media
— Blog content
— Tracking URLs
— Web pages
— CTAs
— Landing pages
— Forms
— Integrations
— Workflows & automations
— Contact segmentation

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What's next?

We hope you've enjoyed learning a bit about the inbound approach for universities.

Setting up an inbound campaign requires a lot of work and high attention to detail. Knowing where to begin is the first hurdle to climb so if you have any questions or would like to discuss how Contra could help formulate an inbound strategy, don't hesitate to get in touch with our digital marketing specialist, Matt Johnson.

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Thanks

for reading, let us know if you have any questions :)

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