

The National Newspaper of Admissions Marketing

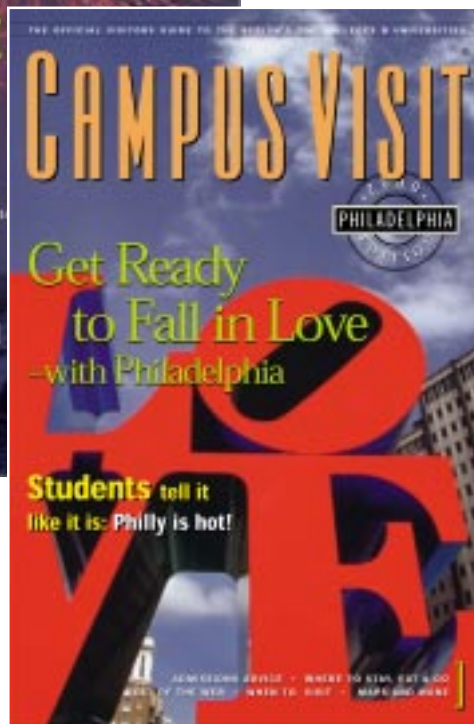
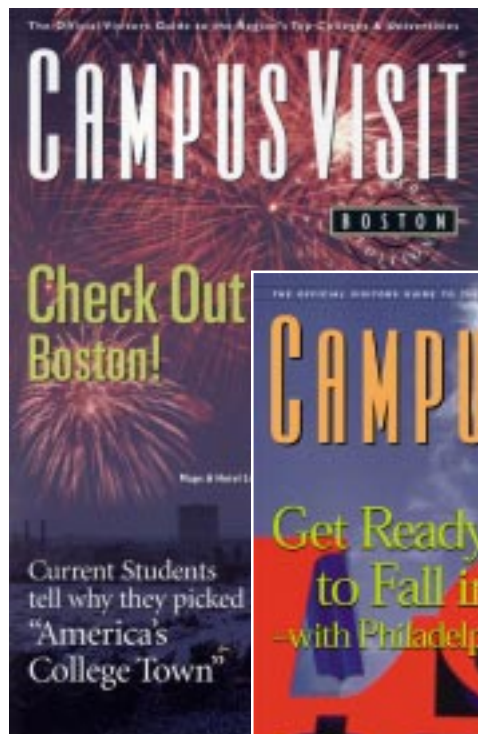
ADMISSIONS

VOL. XVI, NO. IX

MARKETING REPORT

October 2000

Don't Underestimate the Value of the Visit



by *Todd Hoffman*
Associate Director – Campus Visit, Inc.

The most important step in the funnel,” admissions guru, Bob Sevier, declared at a recent NACAC conference, “is the campus visit. The #1 job (of Admissions) is to get the student to campus, then make sure they have a great visit.”

While many factors influence a student’s final choice, none are as emotionally-charged, physically-exhausting or as pivotal as the campus visit.

Consider that only one in ten students will attend a college that they didn’t visit beforehand. And that the typical student will only visit three schools.

How can you maximize your odds of being one of those all-important three? Begin by taking a close look at your visit strategy. Make sure you’re ready for “ShowTime” and not giving a performance as dated as *The Brady Bunch*.

At Campus Visit®, we work with more than 30 Philadelphia and Boston area schools, employing a number of strategies to improve student yield (both quantity and quality).

As a result, these colleges are not only

attracting more campus visitors, but creating a better overall impression during those visits. They've discovered that the total visit experience is much more than the time spent on campus and have reengineered their strategies accordingly.

Travel Distance Counts

The first major step is to create two separate strategies: One for out-of-region visitors (those who'll be travelling far from home) and another for locals. This latter group has the benefit of waking up in their own bed, driving a short distance to the campus, and returning home in time for the family dinner. A simple day trip.

Now consider what the out-of region candidate or "tourist in disguise" has to endure just to reach campus. Their overall visit experience is typically more intense and influential on their final decision than the second group ... those who live within laundry distance of school.

If a New Jersey family heads up to Boston for the day they're looking at 10+ hours in the minivan compared with only two to four hours actually spent on campus. By the time they arrive home it is late in the evening and everyone is exhausted, cranky or both.

No matter how great the campus tour, the takeaway impression is dampened by an overall feeling of fatigue. Would their feelings for that college be any different if they had spent the night in a nice Boston hotel and seen a Red Sox game or the Boston Symphony Orchestra perform? You bet.

In our experience, the more time spent discovering a school's surroundings and all they have to offer, the easier it is for prospects and their parents to visualize ... and to appreciate ... a school's own features.

But the reality is that every year too many visiting families will turn what should be an overnight into a day trip. And you both pay the price.

Remember, these are tourists disguised as campus visitors. And your ultimate goal is to convince them to become residents at your school for the next several years. Open houses aside, the majority of your top candidates will arrive on their own and appreciate any extra help and advice you're willing to provide.

We recommend to all of our partner schools that they stress the benefits of a one or two night stay whenever possible. Suggest some itineraries that marry the on-campus visit with an exploration of the area, including off-campus activities that are fun for the whole family such as a ball game, concert and/or rollerblading as well as where to rent them.

In Boston and Philadelphia, we've arranged special rates with a number of hotels that are bookable online. And since mom's typically more comfortable using the phone, we staff a toll-free visitor hotline for each city. That way, she can shop several hotels with a single phone call or have directions to campus faxed to her anytime of day or night.

Courting Out-of-region Students

For prospects living hundreds of miles from campus, trip planning is only one of many stresses they encounter that the locals do not. Other factors impacting their experience and state-of-mind during the visit include: Scheduling considerations (missing work and school), financial consid-

erations (the whole trip can easily cost thousands), unfamiliar destination, safety concerns, and separation anxiety as well as heightened expectations for the trip itself (especially if it's the eldest child and their first ever campus visit.)

Like a wedding, the first campus visit is one of life's milestones that parents look to with mixed emotions. The realization that little Johnny or Jill is about to leave the nest is staring them squarely in the face.

Keep this in mind when you're training the next

A short course on booking Boston

TRIP PLANNING 101

GETTING THE MOST OUT OF A CAMPUS VISIT starts with picking the right dates for the trip. Sounds simple enough, but it's actually a challenge: the best times to see the colleges are also the most popular times to visit the Boston area.

From April through November, the city's hotels are virtually standing room only and prices can be high. However, if you can afford it, staying downtown is the best way to get a feel for the city. Our advice: begin calling hotels as soon as you know your travel dates, a month prior is not too early. Two weeks out is cutting it close.

To find great travel deals try Campus Visit® Travel Desk at 888-99-VISIT or www.campusvisit.com

JULY-AUGUST
Boston is at its best and most beautiful. However, like May-June, schools are not in full swing. Update: Great chance to turn your trip into a full-fledged family vacation.

SEPTEMBER-OCTOBER
CONSIDERED THE BEST AND MOST TRADITIONAL time for campus visits. Many schools host open houses, so check with Admissions for special visit programs. Hotels are full of weekend lead-pipers and weekday business types, so expect to pay a premium. The long Columbus Day and Veterans Day weekends are among the most popular dates. Best to pick alternate dates.

NOVEMBER-DECEMBER
AFTER THE FIRST WEEK OF NOVEMBER, HOTEL occupancy drops significantly, so call around for best rates. With the exception of Thanksgiving (11/22-25) and after December 10th, these are good dates to meet with Admissions and crash the schools in fall swing. Best to stay away during final exam dates.

MARCH-APRIL
THROUGH EARLY APRIL, ADMISSIONS OFFICES are heavily involved with reviewing applications, so scheduling may be difficult. The rest of April is a great time to visit schools, especially for juniors eager to get an early start. It's best to avoid Boston Marathon weekend (4/13-16) and Spring Break periods (call your desired school for specific dates).

MAY-JUNE
A BEAUTIFUL TIME TO VISIT, BUT MOST SCHOOLS are not in full session, so you won't get the complete picture. This is also peak time for open houses, so call well in advance for the best deals.

© Campus Visit | 888-99-VISIT

Your prospects' impressions will be based on the whole visit; not just time spent on campus. Plan accordingly.

crop of tour guides. Everyone on the walk may fit a similar physical profile, but what's going on in the minds of out-of-towners will vary dramatically from those who already share your college's area code.

During high volume periods, you may even consider separating the two groups and choreographing their tours accordingly. For locals, the topic of location can be covered in seconds. But, for out-of-towners, the issue is far more complex and requires much more time, not to mention a separate script, to do it justice.

Selling Location

Every location, be it Boston or the boondocks, has its pluses and minuses.

It used to be that the nine most frightening words a parent could hear were: "I want to go to school in the city." The mere mention would send them into a tailspin. Now, urban education is all the rage. Concerns for a child's safety have been replaced with images of internships at Fortune 500 companies, exposure to other nationalities, and nights at the theatre.

Schools in more bucolic, rural settings have their own shifting set of positives to promote and issues to address.

Prospects and parents alike are well aware that only half of the education they're about to pay handsomely for will take place in the classroom. So don't overlook this opportunity to tell them about the other half. But simply dedicating a page in the view book to a skyline shot and list of tourist attractions doesn't drive the proximity point home. In the cases of Philadelphia and Boston, our partner colleges benefit from a focused marketing effort, which includes four-color regional magazines that we've created to deliver the whole story to their out-of-region candidates.

As Swarthmore's Tom Krattenmaker explains: "Our location near Philadelphia gives us a competi-

tive advantage over several other liberal arts colleges. So to the extent that the Campus Visit initiative makes Philadelphia better known and appreciated by prospective students ... the greater our edge."

Updated each year, these guides also serve as a "Fodor's Guide for Future Freshmen", helping them with all of their trip planning needs and further emphasizing the benefits of a longer stay. Anytime you can get a prospect to spend 24 hours in your area instead of two to four, you'll have a definite advantage over shorter visits to those schools you cross applications with.

These guides also tie into the other main elements of both Campus Visit programs: the companion websites and toll-free visitor hotlines.

Now, you may be thinking: "Nice thought, but there's no way I can be a visitors bureau and an admissions office." Not to worry. Leave that to organizations like ours.

The Power of Partnering

Teaming up with nearby colleges is certainly not a new idea. Consortiums have existed since the 1960's. However, stepping beyond lobbying and bulk purchasing is certainly not as common as it should be.

As is the case for both Boston and Philly, we've recruited dozens of partners who are happy to share program costs. In addition to other schools in your area that have similar visit

issues, consider the hotels and restaurants who benefit from your "affluent, educated" clientele and local employers who want a shot at your graduates. Many will jump at the chance to work with you if the opportunity is well thought-out and presented.

A great first-step and team-building exercise we recommend is hosting a brainstorming session with your admissions team. Over soda and snacks, you'll be amazed at the list of great ideas and "no brainers" that will pop up.



We find that most colleges do a poor job of promoting the great resources that exist beyond the campus gates.

Start by profiling who your classic campus visitors are, how many, and how long they stay in the area. A thousand families spending the night is worth about \$250,000 in tourism dollars alone. When most schools consider all of their “tourists in disguise”, they typically uncover an figure several times greater.

When you add your admissions figures to other on-campus events like homecoming, parents weekends, football Saturdays, and alumni visits you’re building a huge bargaining chip that you’ll be able to use with local hotels and restaurants, if not city hall.

Like you, most businesses pay handsomely to reach their best prospects. For the hotel up the road, your school could be responsible for as much as a quarter of their sales. Even if they’re already giving you a discounted rate, don’t be shy about approaching them as a “sponsor” of your next open house or visit brochure. Line up 3-4 hotel partners and you may be able to offset half your printing costs with the mere mention of their location and phone number.

Considering that your school is responsible for millions in tourism revenue, employs thousands and, unlike the major business down the road, won’t be leaving town any time soon, collaborating on a visit program is a win-win situation for everyone involved.

To help you visualize the possibilities, here are snapshots of two successful visit programs we’ve developed for Philadelphia and Boston.

Campus Visit / Philadelphia

Formed less than a year ago with 16 founding partner colleges, the primary sponsor of the initiative is actually the Greater Philadelphia Tourism Marketing Corporation (GPTMC) with the University of Pennsylvania serving at the other major catalyst.

A few years ago, GPTMC initiated a study that identified the multi-million dollar impact that visitors to “Philly’s 50” colleges and universities have on the region. By partnering with Penn and the major schools in the area, they hope to increase both the number of visitors and the length of their stay. The schools, in turn, share the same objective. There’s your win-win.

Beyond the magazine, toll-free visitor hotline (877-88-PHILA) website (www.onebigcampus.com), we’re working on several lead-generating and visit-generating components that serve the common needs of all of the college partners.

Other efforts are in play to improve student retention and raise Philly’s profile as a multi-dimensional college town under the “one big campus” banner.

“Chestnut Hill has all of the benefits of a small college located in a great city,” says their marketing manager, Kate McClellan. “Getting that word out through Campus Visit has proven to be a tremendous marketing tool. The front cover says it all – ‘Get Ready to Fall in Love... with Philadelphia.’”

Yet, to fall in love with any city or college you have to experience it first-hand. Which is what this program is all about.

Campus Visit / Boston

You might think “America’s College Town” doesn’t need any help. But these days, every school has competition. Even Harvard and MIT. With the gulf between private and public education costs widening, it’s now even more important to clearly communicate the unique advantages of a Boston-based education.

What started in 1995 with eight partners covering the cost of a 32-page visitor guide now involves 16 area schools, a popular website (www.campusvisit.com), a toll-free hot line (888-99-VISIT) and 175,000 annual copies of a 40-page guide.

Unlike the Philadelphia initiative, this one has been around long enough to show results, including an overall 23% increase in applications when compared with pre-program figures. Nationwide, the increase over the same time period hovers around 4%.

Go the Extra Mile

There’s never been a better time to consider bold changes to your visit strategy. The climate for collaboration has never been better. The economy is strong. Hotels are hungry. And with the supply of prospects at an all-time high, your best chance to dramatically improve student yield ... both quality and quantity ... is now. Carpe Diem. ☺

Todd Hoffman is associate director of Campus Visit, Inc., founding the company with his wife, Cherie, in 1995. His background in hospitality marketing led to his appreciation for the impact that location and area amenities can have on college recruitment. He can be reached at (781) 431-7755 or via email at thoffman@campusvisit.com.

