The Student Marketer's Guide:

Virtual Open Days

NATIVES

Introduction

Open Days create an opportunity to build an emotional connection between applicants, parents, lecturers and institutions. They provide an opportunity for you to link all your digital and out-of-home campaigns with real-life experience, enabling attendees to get a feel for the on-campus vibe. But what happens when a global crisis blows the scope for physical events out of the water?
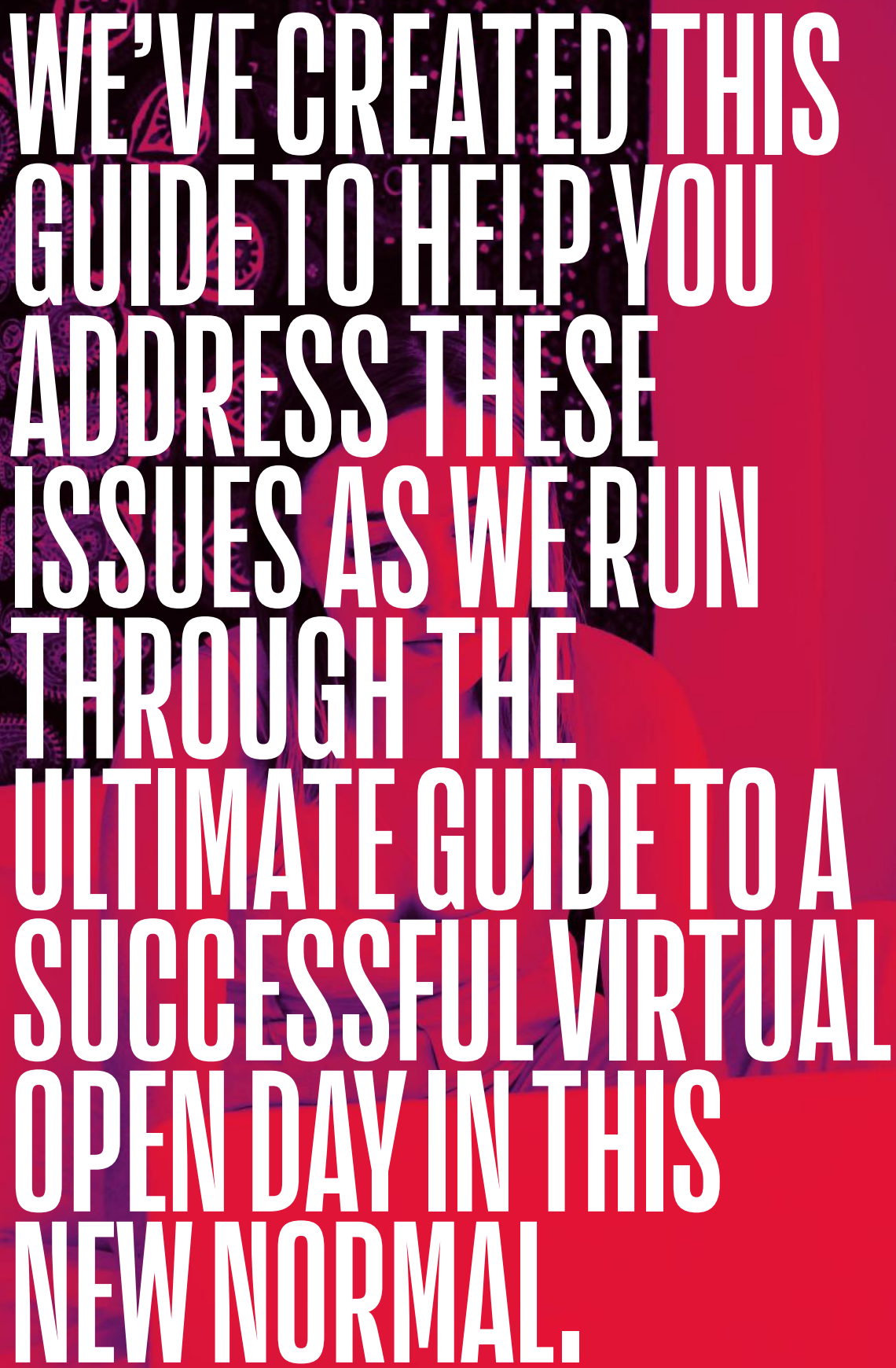
While the coronavirus outbreak is changing an awful lot about the education landscape, and the logistics of Open Days as we've always known them, one thing it won't change is students' need for information and connection. So what can you do when your events have been cancelled? Pivot.

Open Days are a crucial part of the student recruitment journey, so just because they can't physically go ahead, doesn't mean they should be cancelled altogether. Especially when you consider

that 94% of students say that events such as Open Days are important factors when deciding which university to attend. From our very own Student Media Insights Survey, we know that by attending an Open Day students are 60% more likely to convert and consider your institution when deciding their final place of study.

So amid this global disruption, it's not the time to put a pin in your Open Day plans, but instead adapt and adjust with virtual solutions.

WE'VE CREATED THIS GUIDE TO HELP YOU ADDRESS THESE ISSUES AS WE RUN THROUGH THE ULTIMATE GUIDE TO A SUCCESSFUL VIRTUAL OPEN DAY IN THIS NEW NORMAL.

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TENTS

Forget what you think you know

As every student marketer will know, you won't always have control over what happens with the wider sector, your institution, or your on-campus events. And that's never been truer than in 2020. So, just like we've said over the last few years, the importance of your digital marketing will continue to increase, and then some.

Prospects will need to be nurtured by digital touchpoints throughout the recruitment cycle and on key platforms. Being ever-present for questions and responsive to every engagement, while turbocharging your campaigns with targeted and cost-effective lead gen tactics, will be more important than ever before.

Budgets are going to be tight, and resources are going to be stretched. Cancelled events, global lockdowns and border restrictions aren't ideal at any time, so you're going to need to work smart.

At the time of writing, we have no idea how long the pandemic or lockdown will last, beyond the most realistic forecasts that the entire recruitment cycle is going to be completely disrupted. But the effects will be felt for even longer. So, if you don't have complete control, how can you use data to help make your virtual Open Days more successful?

Forget what you think you know

It starts with forgetting what you think you know. Ensure that your marketing decisions are rooted in an understanding of your students. Being audience-led in your approach will not only lead to better marketing decisions, but you'll become more confident in challenging internal perceptions of what students want. And that will result in more effective Open Day campaigns, turning enquiries into applications.

It's important that you start with a discovery phase and map out where you can find out more about your audience. Here are some examples of where you might find that all-important data.
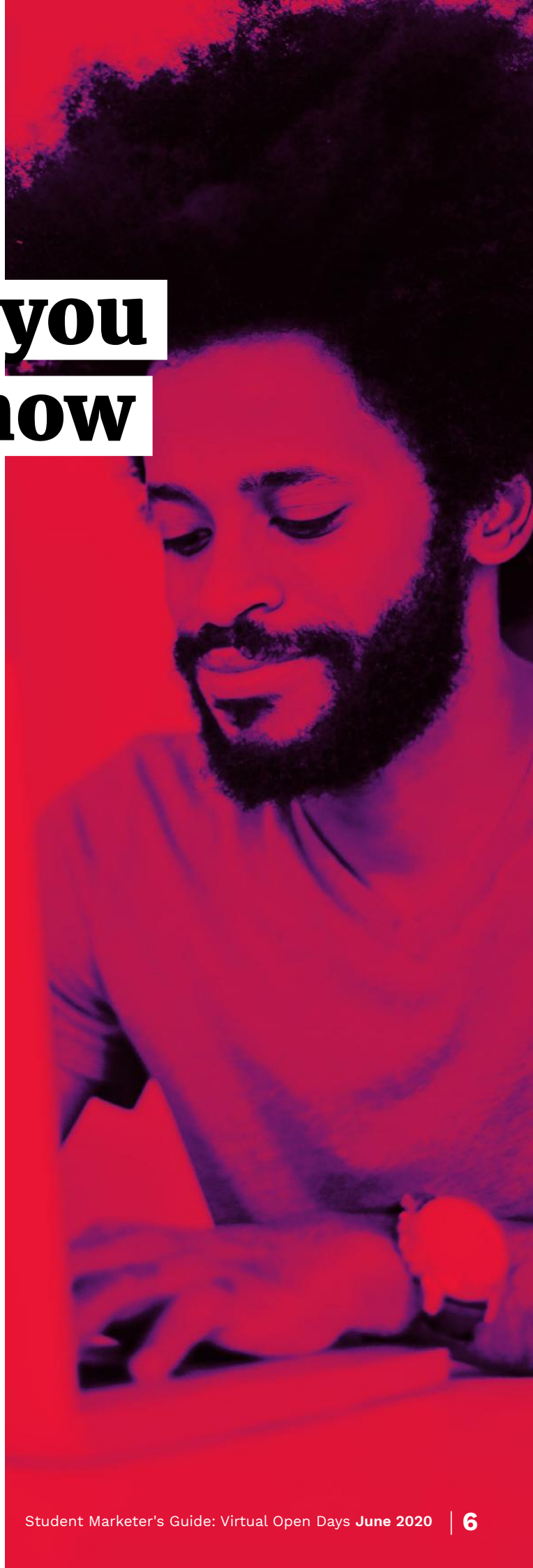
Search

93% of online user journeys begin with Search. The two biggest players, Google and Bing, have a plethora of tools that can be used to observe the online behaviours of students. Google's Trends and Keyword Planner features are both very useful, as they are able to monitor users' search patterns. By utilising this behavioural data, you can tailor your messaging to ensure it aligns closely with what people are searching for.

Primary data

Your greatest asset is your own data. Having this at your fingertips will help you to understand your student audience, both current and prospective. So, what primary data do you have access to? And what can you get access to that you're currently lacking?

Social media data

We all know that students spend a huge amount of time on social media, and for many institutions, social platforms are an important channel. And there is a wealth of data there for you to understand your student audience. Most platforms have their own analytics, and tools like Edurank let you see what the sector's top-performing content is and even benchmark yourself against your competitors. Enterprise features let you go even further and look at the daily data to see where the white space is for your own posts.
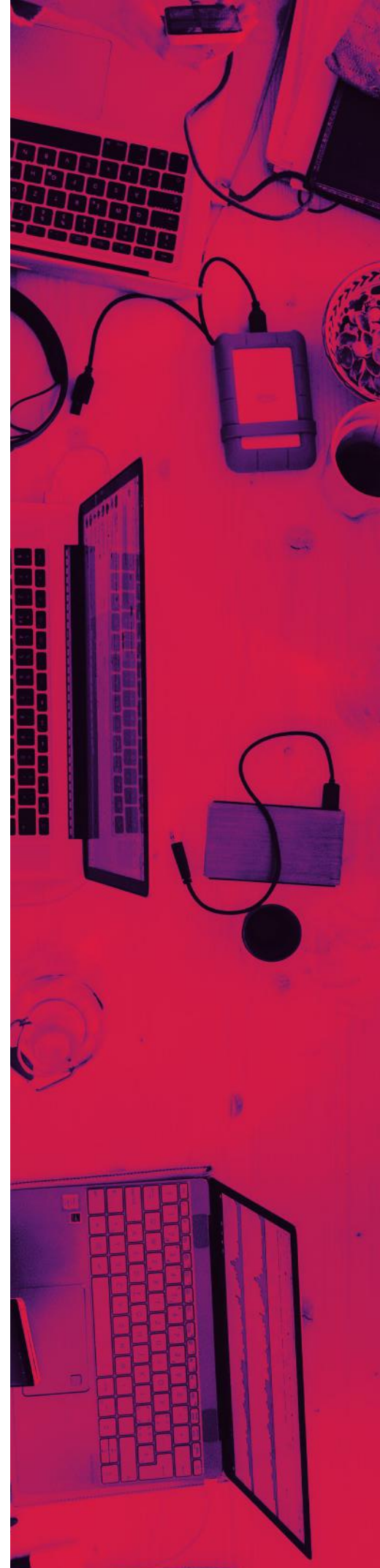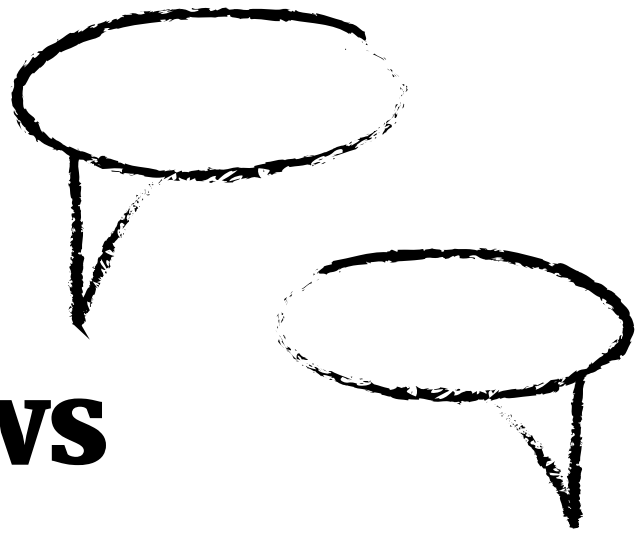
Student reviews

Let's face it, we all use review sites before making any kind of purchase. And this is regardless of any global disruption that may be underway. Review sites have become ubiquitous to almost every sector, and the education space is no different – with university and lifestyle review sites, such as Student Hut, growing in popularity.

So why have these sites become so popular with students? Because, like all of us, students are seeking the best possible value. These sites are independent; presenting thousands of real student reviews on university life, courses, accommodation and more. Online peer reviews are proving incredibly useful, particularly for international students who may be conducting most of their research online.

But you can also use review sites to see what students are saying about your institution, and adjust your strategy accordingly. And if you have some great reviews, then they can be a rich source of authentic testimonials.

If you haven't got the time or expertise in house, then work with an agency or panel. They'll help you access amazing data sources and have experience in research that you might be lacking.

Student reviews

Having this understanding of research allows institutions to further understand their target audience and tap into the mindset of students during the whole journey. This enables institutions to target prospective students through the right channels, at the right time and with the right message. It also ensures that decisions aren't made based on assumptions, but data-driven insights, to help with long-term planning and marketing decisions that will give you the edge.

So, what does this data tell us? When looking at promoting your Open Days, really think about who your target audience is and whether you're reaching the right people. Student Hut's Opinion Panel has found that students are happy to adjust to online interaction, and they want regular communications. So make sure you're using the right copy and imagery to engage them.

> " A GREAT CITY FOR NIGHTS OUT; LOTS OF BARS AND CLUBS WITH A BRILLIANT ATMOSPHERE. "
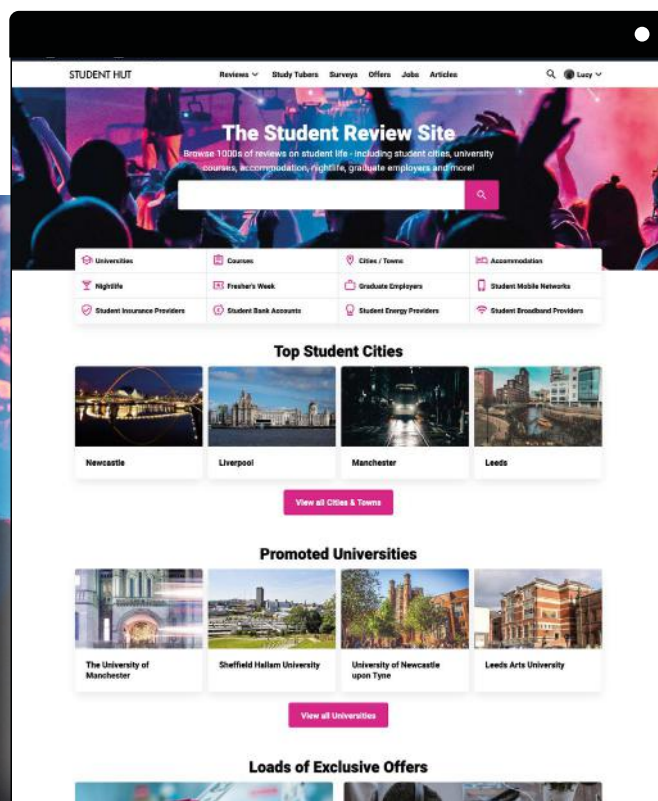
Embrace innovation and your own students

Open Days, in the traditional sense, are all about a student coming to your campus and feeling something. And then sharing that feeling. That still applies, even if you have to create that emotion online. Creating a unique experience at your Open Day will leave your prospective students with a story to tell. Stuck for inspiration? You can always look outside the sector...

An industry hit hard by Covid-19 is live entertainment; with gigs, tours and festivals being cancelled all over the world. Artists need to think fast. Which is what Travis Scott, a rapper and a student favourite, did when it came to releasing his new single. By hosting a virtual concert on the game Fortnite, dubbed the 'Astronomical' experience, he was still able to drum up a buzz. Gigs may not be possible right now, but the collective atmosphere of experiencing something for the first time together is.

And that's what institutions must still strive for.

> SO MANY PEOPLE ARE PLAYING FORTNITE IT'S STRAINING ITALY'S ENTIRE INTERNET CONNECTION.

Embrace innovation and your own students

The way students are consuming social content is also showing the want for collaborative experiences too. Such as the increasing popularity of Google Chrome's Netflix Party extension that enables users to binge-watch their favourite series' remotely with friends. Or clapping together at 8pm on a Thursday for the NHS, and sharing the experience across social media.

And there's a reason why TikTok Duets, where two collaborators can remotely produce a split-screen choreography of two videos, has exploded since the lockdown was announced.
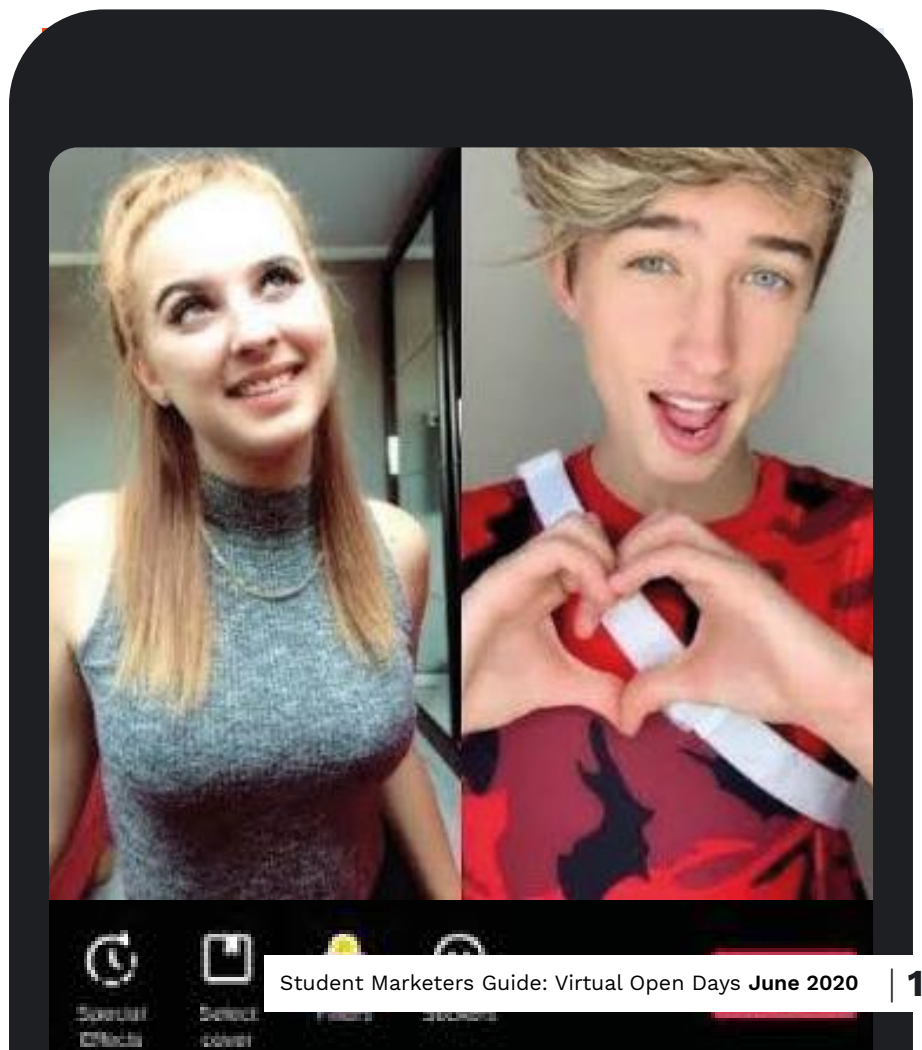
71% OF RESPONDENTS USE SNAPCHAT ON A DAILY BASIS - UP FROM 65% IN 2016.

A virtual tour is one thing, but students don't only go to Open Days to explore the library, accommodation, and the inside of lecture halls. They go to check out who could be their brand new housemate-turned-best mate, the people they'll be spending freshers' week with, or the lecturer that will go on to inspire their career choices. Your virtual Open Day can't be a passive experience, but instead aim for students to get involved, create their own content and interact with one another.

And we know Gen Z are well-known FOMO sufferers. Could this fear of missing out be used as a way to create a buzz and ensure your virtual Open Day is an event not to be missed? We know from the National Clearing Survey that university applicants are using Snapchat more than any other platform to communicate with their friends. In

fact, 71% of respondents use Snapchat on a daily basis – up from 65% in 2016. Are you using this platform to spread your #ClassOf20/21 spirit? Snapchat's Geofilters and custom lenses are a fun way to encourage prospective students to document their experience, and that can happen at your virtual Open Day too. Snapchat isn't where we'd stop either. The place for Instagram Lives in everyday life has increased 70% since lockdown, once again because users can collaborate on a Live and followers can be a part of that real-time conversation, asking questions and expressing their thoughts. And when Miley Cyrus has finished joining forces with the likes of Dua Lipa, Demi Lovato, and Hailey Bieber to go live, Chris Martin takes the stage to perform a #TogetherAtHome gig on Instagram on Monday and John Legend follows on Tuesday, you know students are watching.

These broadcasts work because Gen-Z are known to share their positive experiences very publicly on social media and that means exposure. And when someone in an inner Gen Z circle talks about a brand (or an event, or celebrity conversation), the whole group listens and passes on the positivity (even when it's not their own experience). Almost half of this generation have made a 'second-person' word-of-mouth recommendation for a service or product, based on the positive experience of a friend or relative. 30% have even repeated praise they overheard from someone they didn't know. So if you can create an experience worth sharing, one piece of user-generated content declaring a positive experience, could have countless ripples in both the online and offline worlds, creating the ultimate FOMO vibe.

30% OF STUDENTS HAVE EVEN REPEATED PRAISE THEY OVERHEARD FROM SOMEONE THEY DIDN'T KNOW.

The best user-generated content isn't just for FOMO purposes either. 90% of young people believe that authenticity is hugely important to brands and fortunately, consumers generally consider user-generated content the most authentic form of content. Three times more authentic than brand content to be exact. It's deemed as 'real and organic', as opposed to brand content, that's 'perfect and packaged'. Therefore, aligning your brand's messaging and advertising with this crowd-pleasing content is a no-brainer. And you can trust your student audience. Look what happens when you do. Rapper Dave showcased the possibilities of user-generated content with his song 'Thiago Silva', and a spontaneous performance from teenager 'Alex from Glasto'. After a word-perfect performance of the complex rap, Alex found himself the surprise hit of Glastonbury as well as the subject of content that went viral globally. His Spotify figures, as a result, saw a huge spike of 88% in the days that followed. And you can't fake this authenticity either, as consumers can distinguish between user-generated content and brand-created content 70% of the time. Could you give the reins to your student ambassadors and influencers for the next virtual Open Day, hosted exclusively on Instagram Live?

- Adidas' Tango Squad FC Campign

Authenticity is (crucial) when trying to attract this generation, but the good news? Your students can help.

Some brands and universities are investing in authentic content by building influencers from the ground up. Adidas' Tango Squad campaign has done this very successfully, empowering Gen-Z street footballers from small-sided Adidas leagues around the world, and since universities have hundreds of thousands of students currently sitting on the sidelines, there's the perfect opportunity for prospective and existing students to make great content for you too. And, not only will students be doing the heavy lifting, this approach will help you prove that every student's experience is unique and a platform of opportunity and growth, whilst creating a community of internal ambassadors.

And then you can go one step further by identifying and nurturing tribes to create a feeling of attachment. Once you've created a platform or space for like-minded individuals and prospective students to connect, it's time to personalise their experiences. This is an integral element in building brand loyalty in potential applicants. One Instagram Live, or virtual tour, or online networking event will not be enough to engage every tribe, so think about segmenting them. Engaging a tribe doesn't necessarily mean you need to lead them, but rather

provide a platform to bring people together and facilitate conversations.

Take a look at how ASICS built a tribe by creating 'community connections and igniting the passions of young people through sport and social good' with their #IMoveLondon campaign. The key is to appeal to unique ties that connect individuals to existing tribes, by creating valuable content and memorable experiences. This is where Open Days offer the perfect opportunity.

- ASICS' We Move London Campaign
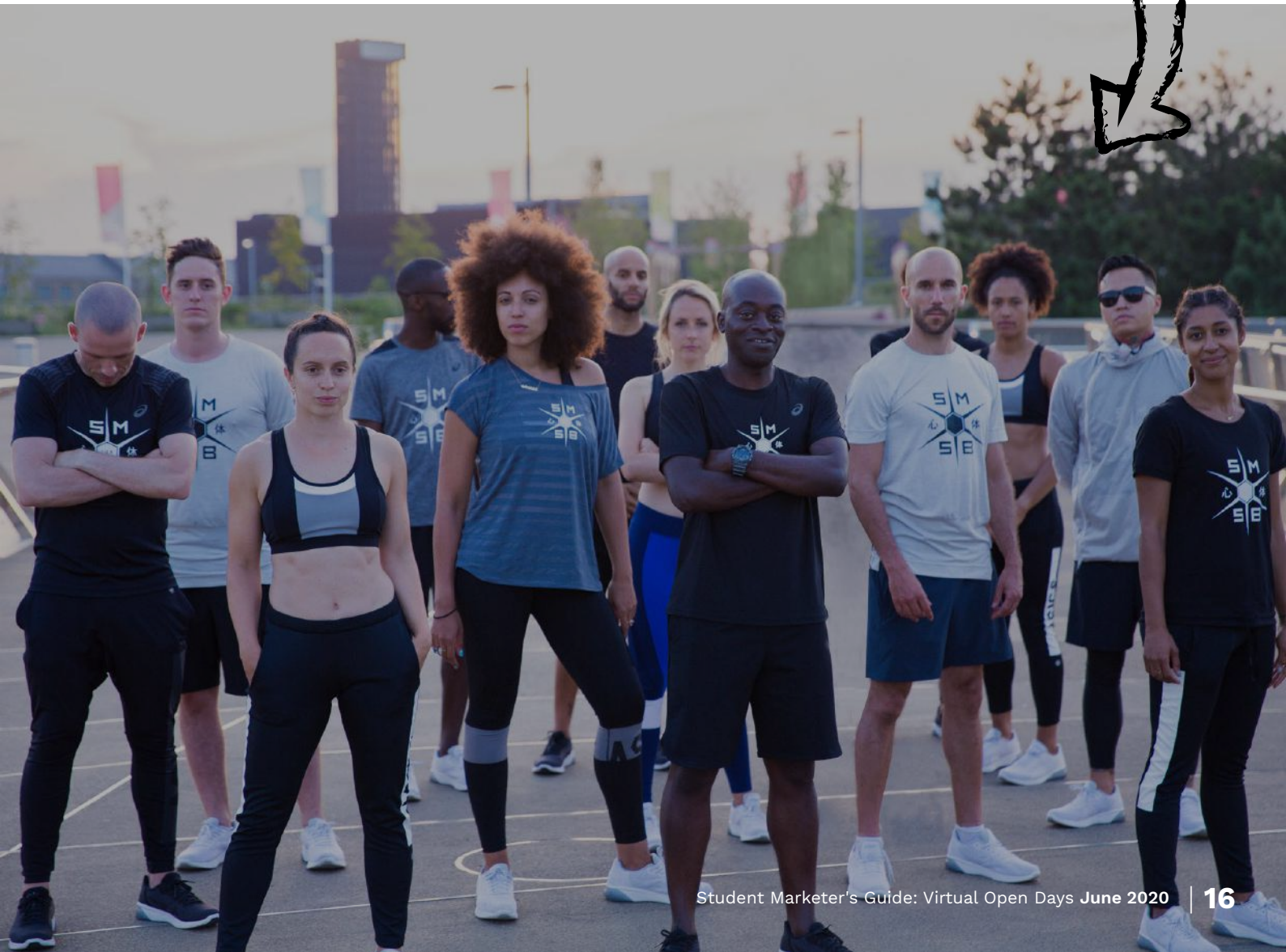
USE YOUR OPEN DAYS TO ORCHESTRATE MEANINGFUL, AUTHENTIC, LONG-LASTING CONNECTIONS BETWEEN PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS, WITH YOUR BRAND AT THE CENTRE. WHETHER IT'S A PHYSICAL EVENT, OR VIRTUAL EVENT, THE PREMISE STAYS THE SAME.

1. Research and identify your tribes

That all-important data you've collected from your virtual Open Day campaigns and sign-up forms can give you the insights to help identify tribes, groups and shared social interests. By segmenting your audience based on their interests, you'll be able to create content that will engage and shape your event to meet expectations whilst providing potential students with the opportunity to connect with other like-minded attendees.

2. Create valuable content and memorable experiences

Encourage your influential alumni to get involved in running online workshops and webinars. Has a successful author graduated from your university? Ask them to run a creative writing workshop for attendees interested in a similar career path. Bring those who have a passion for sport and fitness together for an unforgettable home HIIT workout hosted by an alumni sports star. Take a look at what the National Film and Television School are doing with their series of virtual Open Days, featuring graduate Q&As and showcasing alumni work. Of course, not every university has a claim to fame. And if this is the case, you can use your own data to find micro-

3. Use influencers and their pre-existing tribes to showcase what you have to offer

Don't forget to identify any potential modern-day celebrities that you currently have roaming your virtual campus forums too. Yes you heard that right, the Advertising Standards Authority released a new definition of 'celebrity' and unknowingly, your student body may be a home to a few.

Get in touch with your most creative students, alumni and prospective students with an online following using Student Hut's Study Tuber rank to identify them. Then, let them take charge of a vlogging camera to share their experience of your university and what prospective students need to know about the upcoming academic year in a unique and genuine way. They'll share this online, and the content will be sure to cut through in a way that advertising won't, allowing prospective students to see the real side of campus life. We know this is gold for students. So much so, that hosting an employee or influencer on your Instagram Story for a few days has been shown to boost engagement by nearly 20%.

With over 37,000 video views and 186 comments from fellow peers, Southampton Solent University and Unjaded Jade did just that when they hit the mark with their Open Day vlog. This is something very much attainable, once you're united with your influencers. 2020's Open Day vlog may need a little imagination on how to portray your institution in an exciting and engaging way in the midst of lockdown, but lucky for you, you've got creative students waiting to give it a go.

Your virtual Open Day can then become a golden opportunity to organise something shareable, innovative and interactive. Just don't forget to provide a platform or group for those who attend your virtual Open Day events to connect before, during and after the event – keeping the conversations going, right up until September and beyond.

4. Are you thinking about parents?

Your target audience's other key influencers. Again, using data from the National Clearing Survey, we know that students' university applications are influenced by their parents as well as their friends and peers, and that's no different during the current circumstances. Parents will now be even more concerned about and invested in making sure their children take safe and practical decisions. So don't just create messaging targeted at students, influence their influencers too.

Start to think about content that's targeted towards parents: What will they want to know about your institution? How can you reassure them about the current changes to exams and modes of learning? Create a unique landing page that is designed specifically with parents in mind and include the content and information relevant to their queries. Alumni could be particularly powerful when influencing parents, who are largely interested in career progression and opportunities post-university, so seek them out online and make use of their experience and contacts.

And don't just target your adverts to students either. Currently, Facebook's targeting is limited to what the platform deems to be 'parents of teenagers', which isn't exactly the most accurate way of identifying your audience. Some people won't have confirmed their status as a parent on social media, whilst some may have more complex relationships to the children they are considering university for (such as stepchildren, grandchildren, and so forth). In order to overcome this and ensure you're targeting a more accurate audience, you can use Facebook's lookalike audience feature to target parents who Facebook's algorithm deems similar to the ones who have previously interacted with your ads. This can provide you with a more reflective, dynamic audience pool than you might achieve with interests targeting. Use these audience features to ensure that the valuable influencers in your prospective students' lives know about your upcoming virtual Open Day.
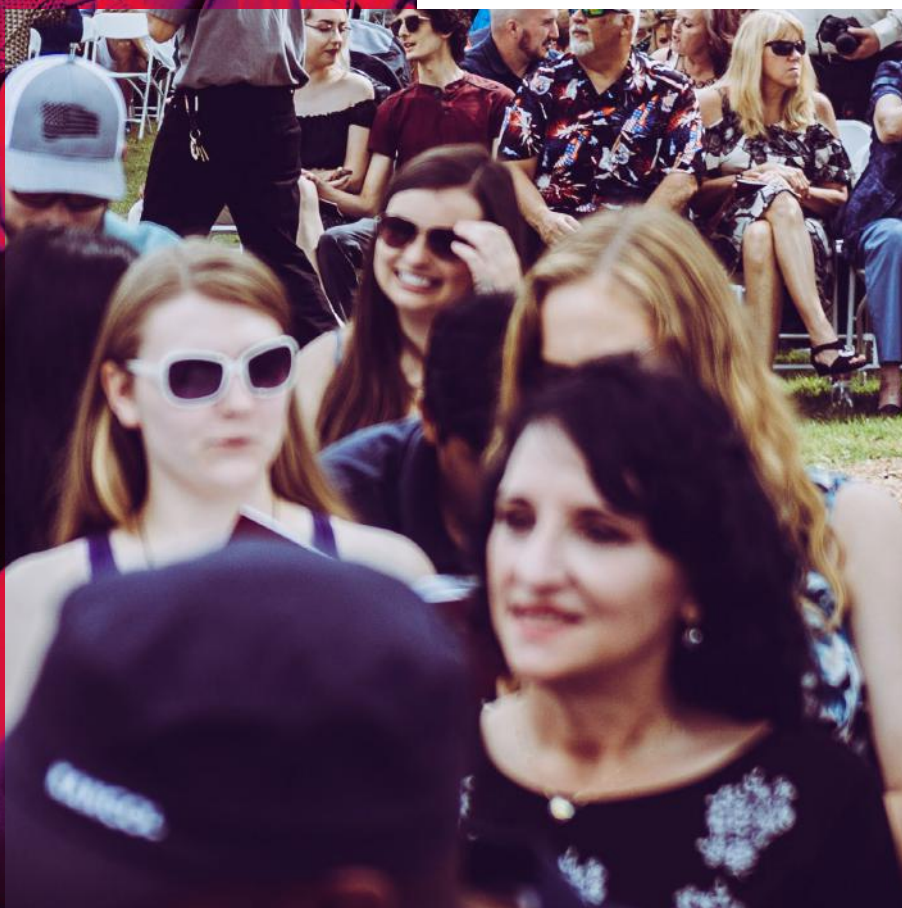
72% OF STUDENTS WANT TO RECEIVE REGULAR COMMUNICATION FROM UNIVERSITIES.

5. Show your difference through your values

Use your virtual Open Day to showcase the difference you're making - whether that's in your contribution to the fight against Covid-19, or otherwise. A recent survey by Student Hut found that, since the lockdown, 72% of students want to receive regular communication from universities. If your institution is doing something positive, innovative or inspiring, you need to talk about it. Consider how your institution can carry a civic responsibility message, with whatever your story may be. 'Here's what we're doing to help our community and society' is a stronger and much more appropriate message right now than 'Apply for clearing'. From scientific research, to mental health support, to a friendly helping hand, there's been some really fantastic examples of what those from our sector have been doing during the pandemic. Ground your USP in what you're doing for society right now, and get your prospective students involved. We talked about a collective experience previously, so why not make your virtual Open Day events just that, while helping wider communities at the same time.

Cross-platform, cross-channel strategies

So now we've identified how best to engage students at your virtual event, whether that's a combination of Instagram Lives with student influencers or a virtual broadcast that allows for interaction and conversation (or a bit of everything), let's talk about actually getting students signed up, loaded up and there on the day. We're going to go behind the scenes at Natives to reveal some of the best tactics to promote your 'New Normal' Open Days.

But before we go any further, one crucial thing to remember: Start early! Be sure to consistently run your campaign throughout the summer, up until the beginning of autumn, to really optimise your Open Day attendance. Who knows what the situation may be towards the tail end of this year, so it's always best to plan, prepare and have a Plan B. With that being said, beware of conflicting search activity during times like Clearing too... you're welcome.

First things first, let's take a deeper look into the student conversion journey to fully understand which tactics work best at certain times, and how to navigate through the entire campaign.

# Cross-platform, cross-channel strategies

Here at Natives, we understand the Mindset Phases of a prospective student. We know where they go, what they are exposed to and the information they require. We target potential students with precise messages that reflect their mindset at the corresponding point of their journey.

The mindset is complex, non-linear and spans multiple channels, platforms and devices. And a student can join or leave the journey at any stage as there are different points, places, devices, times, channels, platforms, people to engage with and derive information from. It's therefore important to ensure students are targeted with the right message for where they are on their journey to making an application.

# Cross-platform, cross-channel strategies

UNDERSTAND

ATTRACT

REACH

NURTURE
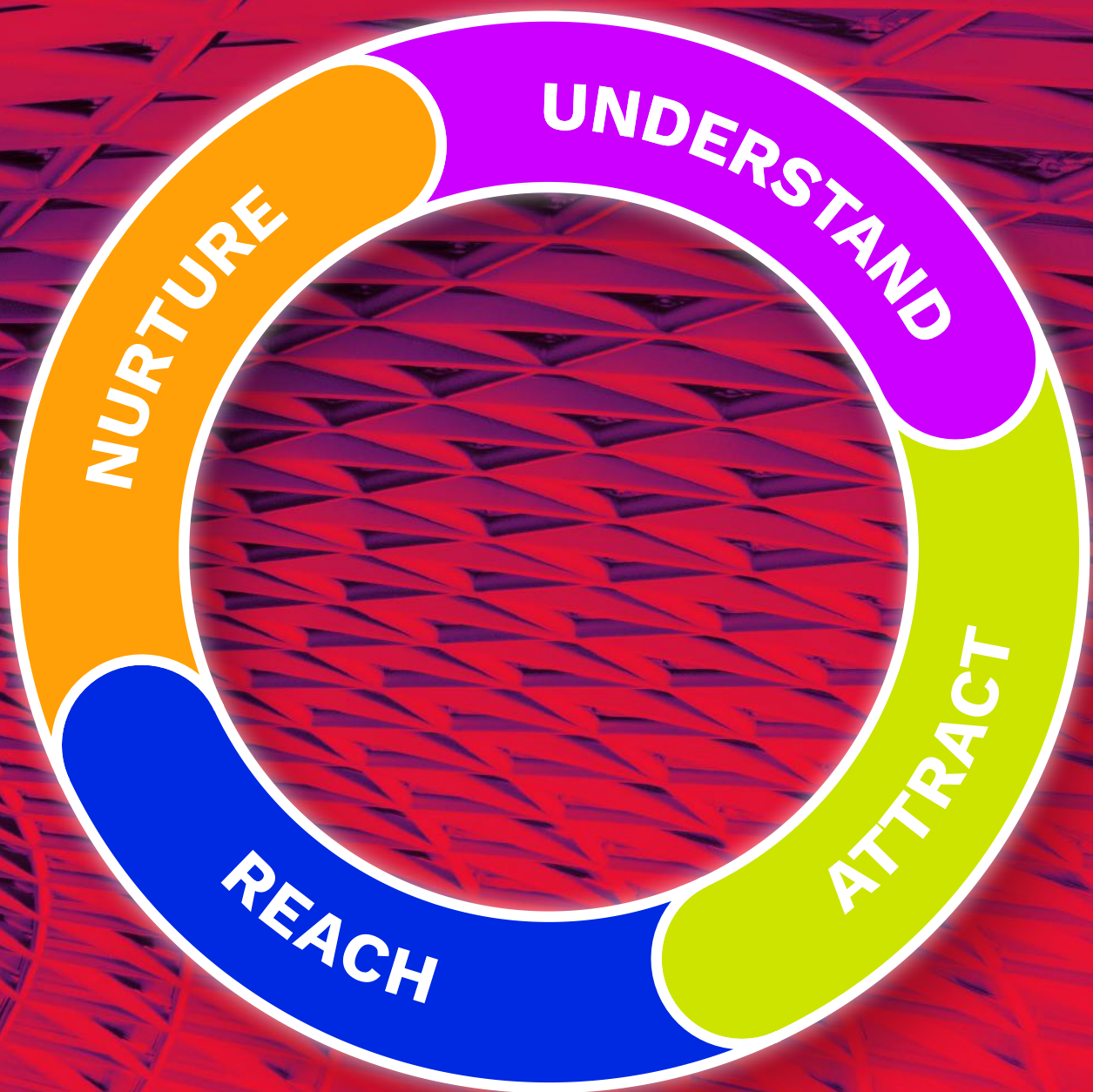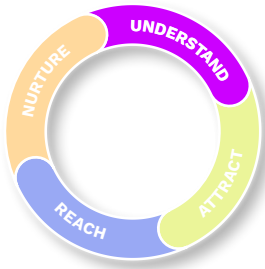
The first touchpoint of a student's journey is likely to come from an awareness tactic. The purpose of this is to reach and recruit at scale. At this stage, you have very little data about the individual, so calls to action such as 'watch more' and 'learn more' are the most effective. Consider tactics such as Instagram Stories and Snap Ads for this stage of the journey. Think about sharing positive news stories and interesting activities that are going on within your institution.
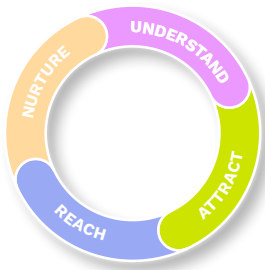
Next, we have consideration, where you are aiming to engage a qualified audience at a relevant moment. Entice this group with calls to action like 'learn more' or 'get involved'. Course-specific search tactics and display ads are also an effective way to evoke these consideration actions. Get that FOMO feeling bubbling.
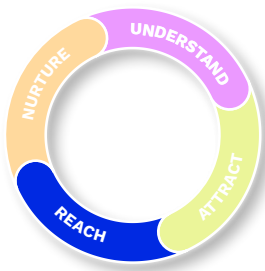
And then it's time to target those ready to make a decision at the intent stage of the student mindset. A strong call to action such as 'join us today' is an effective way to encourage the intent.
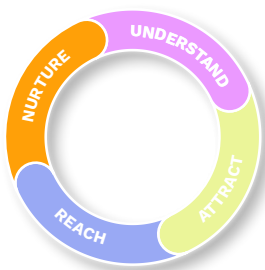
Finally, prospective students need to make a decision. In this instance, it's deciding to attend your Open Day virtual event and registering for their 'seat'. It's now your job to nurture those with the intention to attend and cement this with their registration. Retargeting tactics are an efficient way to do this, using the wealth of data you've collected by this point, to create a direct and powerful campaign.

Cross-platform, cross-channel strategies

It's important to value the whole journey of your prospective students when running virtual Open Day campaigns, from awareness building all the way through to registration. Each one of these touchpoints should be made up of different tactics, measured by different outcomes and KPIs. Now that you understand the type of journey an interested student or key influencer may take when deciding if your Open Day is right for them, let's take a look at some ideas and tactics we use at each stage...
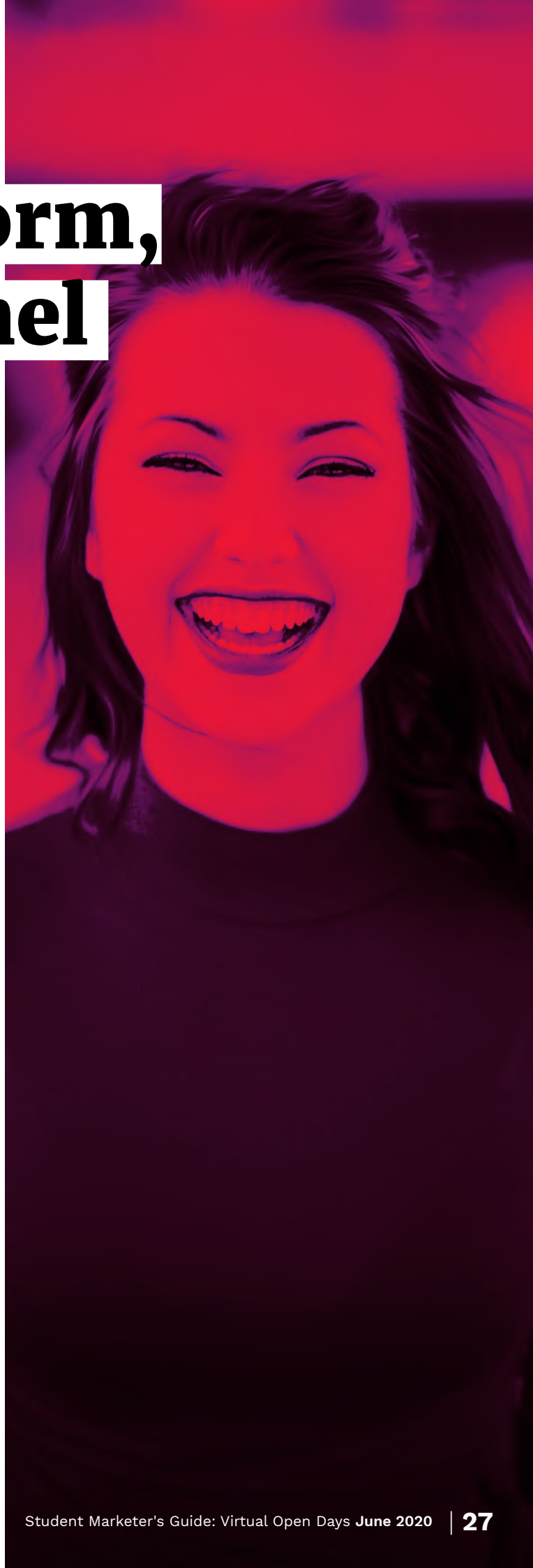
The old favourites

The advertising industry is evolving every single second, and that has only been exacerbated by Covid-19 and the lockdown of institutions across the entire globe. But there are still some tried and tested tactics that remain effective. And as the old saying goes, if it ain't broke, don't fix it.

So without further ado, here are some old favourites...

1. Facebook and Instagram lead generation

Facebook's lead generation ads are a great way to encourage virtual Open Day registrations within the social platforms it owns. By allowing you to utilise integrated form fields, it enables you to create high-intent leads while making the user's journey as linear as possible.
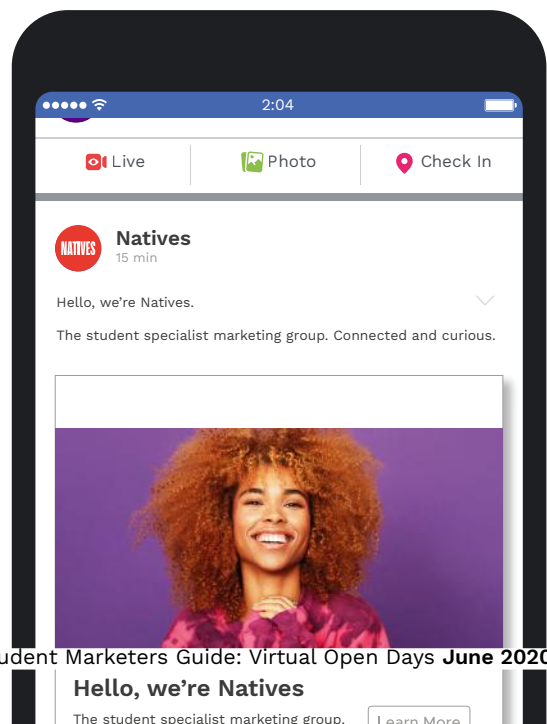
LinkedIn also offers lead generation adverts, which would be great to utilise when promoting your postgraduate or MBA virtual events and Open Days. At first glance, the advert looks like a standard image ad. But once the user clicks the CTA, they are presented with a context card featuring up to five bullet points or a short paragraph of information. They will subsequently be presented with a GDPR-compliant form, followed by a thank you message linking to a web page with more information.

You can use up to 15 custom form fields allowing you to collate a substantial amount of information from your leads to better qualify them. After you've received a registration, you can send a follow-up email with further information that could be useful for prospective attendees. To make this process as manageable as possible, we'd recommend using an integrated lead generation tool such as Akero.
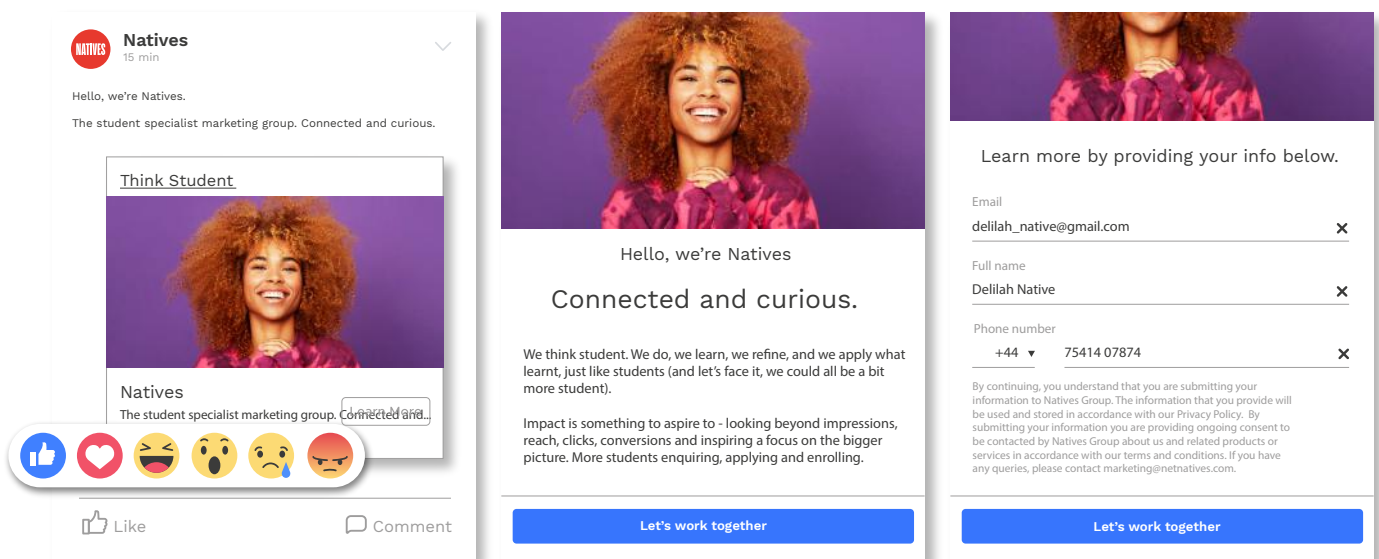
Your Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn leads can all be merged into Akero or another CRM system for further lead nurturing. If a user doesn't complete their form, you can retarget them with tailored messaging that prompts them to complete their registration.

2. Instagram Stories

Instagram Stories are a really engaging platform for promoting Open Days. They're a great format for building awareness and generating registrations, as you can use a 'join now' swipe-up style CTA that takes the audience directly to a registration page. Using footage of previous events, student vlogs and other online activities is a good way to advertise your upcoming Open Days and give the audience a taste of what's in store for them. Try testing different creative and video types for your Instagram Stories to see which is most effective. And if they're seeing your Instagram Ads, there's a good chance they'll be around on the app to see your Instagram Live too.
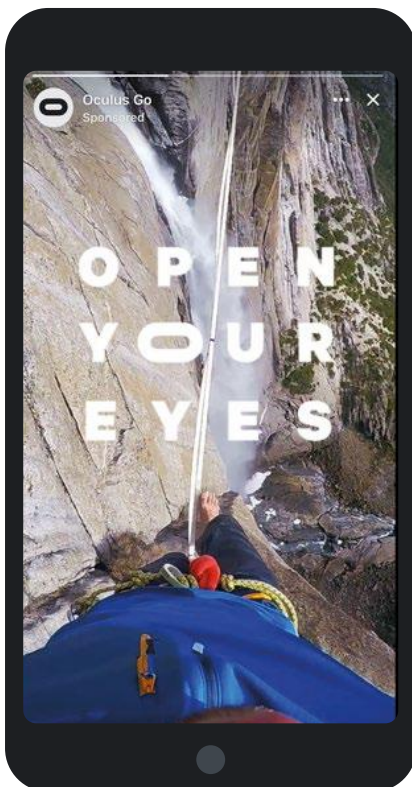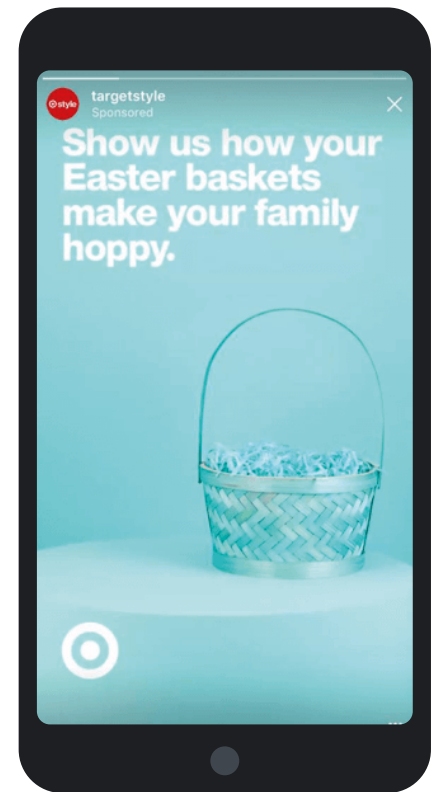
An important consideration with Instagram Stories is that you need to use compelling content to see the best results. Your ROI will be reflective of your creative's substance. Experiment with different content and look to see whether you've received an increase in leads, a reduction in the cost per lead or a reduction in the cost per Open Day attendee. The importance of strong creative applies to most of the advertising formats that we've mentioned in this guide, but it is particularly resonant for Instagram Stories and Snap Ads.

3. Snap Ads
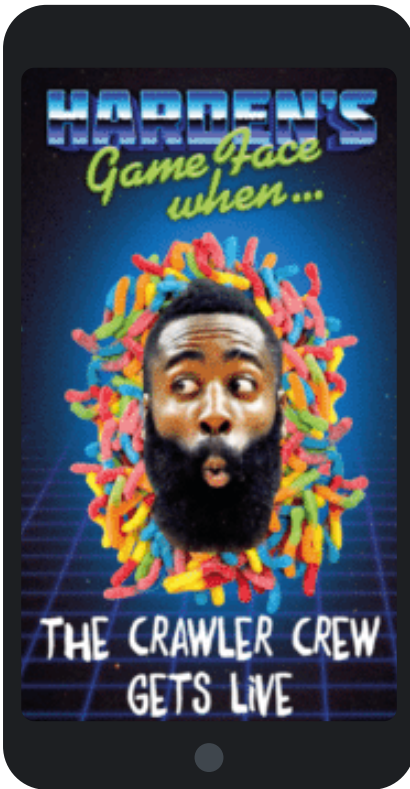
The National Clearing Survey found that Snapchat is the most used platform by prospective undergraduate students on a day-to-day basis. Consequently, it would be foolish to overlook it when planning a virtual Open Day campaign. Snap Ads are an immersive advertising experience similar to Instagram Stories, and they can be used for raising awareness, or even encouraging registrations thanks to their 'swipe-up' style CTA.

There are two routes to driving a conversion from here. The user can either be directed to an optimised version of your landing page within the Snapchat interface, or be rerouted directly to a form without a landing page (similar to lead generation adverts).

Snapchat is versatile with its ad formats. As well as the aforementioned options, you might also consider creating a Snapchat Geofilter or a custom lens for the day of your event to create user-generated content. These are particularly handy for awareness, as they encourage attendees to share their experience of the event with their peers, which enables you to reach users you might have otherwise missed. **The screenshot above is a Geofilter example, and the one on the right is a Lens.**

Just because your audience won't be travelling to your campus, doesn't mean those local to you and your other target locations can't be served highly targeted Snap Ads or Geofilters relevant to their localities.
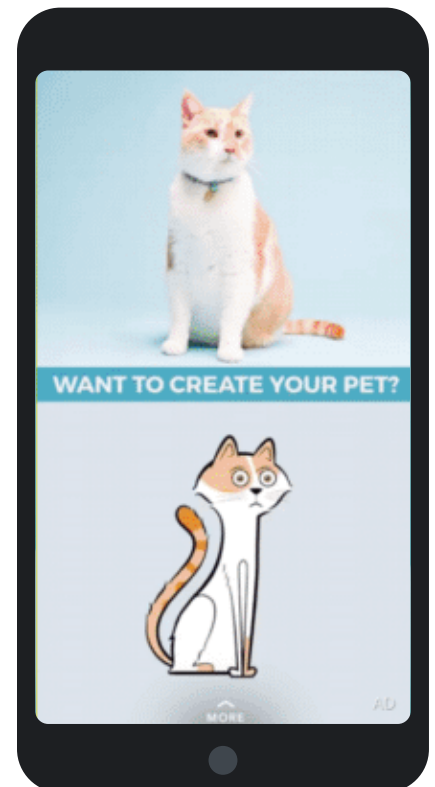
4. Facebook Click-to-Messenger

Use Facebook Click-to-Messenger ads in your Open Day campaigns to provide students with an interactive platform to ask questions and find out more about your event. A fantastic option when the concept of virtual Open Days is new to many students and key influencers. The adverts look similar to Facebook Newsfeed posts but with a 'Send Message' CTA.

When the CTA is clicked, Facebook Messenger will open and the student can send a message directly to your Facebook account. This is a great way to engage students and build relationships ahead of your event, which can help increase the likelihood of attendance and engagement on the day.

If you choose to run Click-to-Messenger ads, be wary that you'll need someone to continuously monitor and reply to the messages you receive.
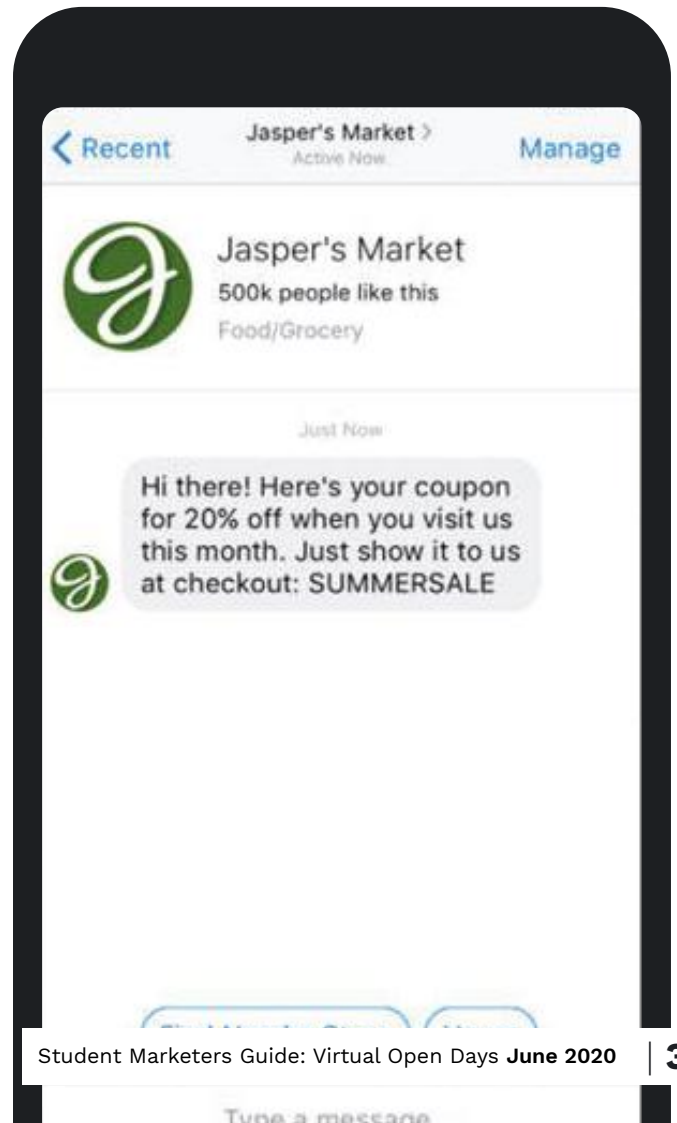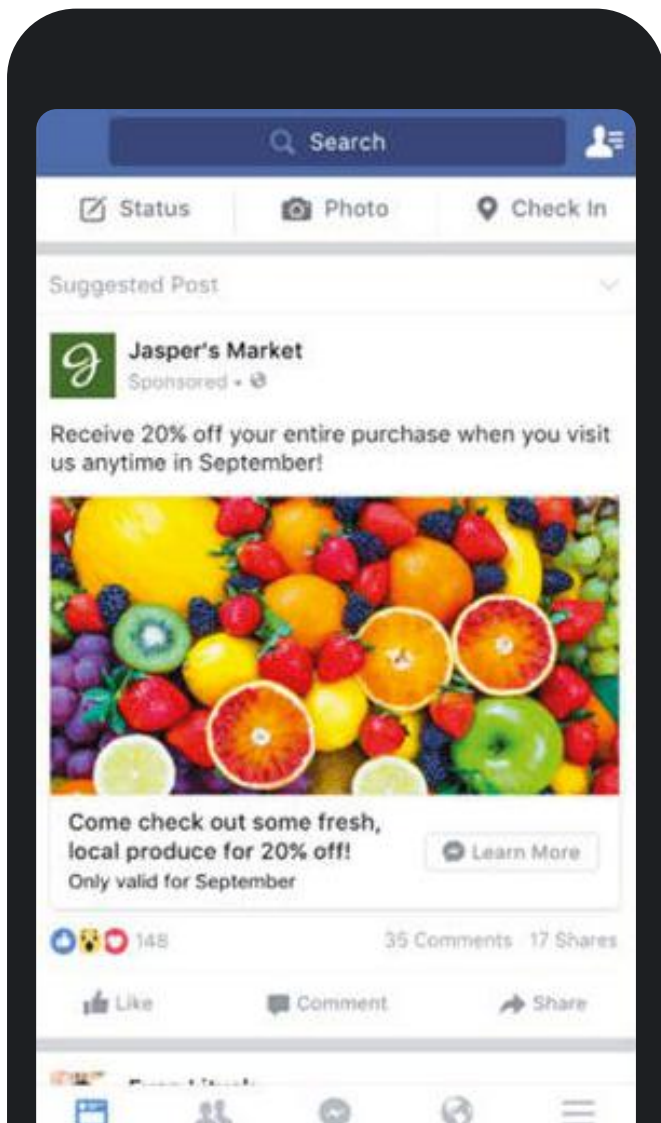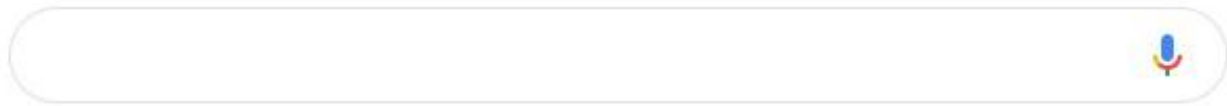
5. Google Search

We've found Google search to be the most effective platform for Open Day campaigns in terms of lead generation and converting leads to attendees on the day, and we predict the same for this year too. Running local campaigns on Google Search is important, particularly if your organic searches don't rank too highly, as you want to ensure that the audience most likely to attend can easily find your institution and access important information, such as event times and an agenda.

Searches for 'online learning', 'online education', 'learning at home', and 'online courses' are increasing, as people spend more time at home. And broader search volumes in the category of 'Education and Training' are increasing. Students might be in lockdown, but their drive to learn hasn't halted.

However, it's also important to think strategically about the regions you target. Think about how competitive you want to be and whether you could focus on new regions, where people are less aware of your institution. Test, get the results and identify where you are seeing the best ROI, then use this insight to inform future campaigns. Search activity in India since their nation's lockdown has exploded into life due to the captive audience being targeted. Now is a fantastic time to diversify your activity into new regions and increase your activity in growing markets such as India.

Before powering ahead however, be wary that when running Open Day search campaigns you will likely be working with popular keywords that have higher CPCs. This could be mitigated by using geographic bid modifiers to ensure that the budget is not consumed entirely in one location. Alternatively, for a more even distribution of leads, you might consider running a number of smaller tactics that target separate regions.

By analysing your audiences and geographic reports, you can create a granular user profile of the people most likely to attend your events. But you need to be strategic with your targeting. Otherwise, you may get people engaging and clicking on your ads that aren't likely to be enrolling in your institution anytime soon or coming to your Open Day online events.

Once you have finalised your target locations and audiences, you might consider setting your search tactic activity as 'always on'. This will ensure a constant presence in SERPs and won't miss any opportunity to capture potential students who are actively searching. However, opting for this will require an indefinite lifetime budget and a consistent spread of virtual Open Day dates throughout the year. You may also want to consider updating the copy on a regular basis, especially as the global situation evolves, to ensure its relevance and that it is an appropriate message, as well as to test how it impacts performance.

And have you thought about your remarketing strategies? Remarketing allows you to strategically position your ads in front of audiences that have already shown interest as they browse online. This strategy is a particularly cost-effective way to increase your conversions as you're reaching out to prospective students who are already quite deep into the consumer journey.

STUDENTS MIGHT BE IN LOCKDOWN BUT THEIR DRIVE TO LEARN HASN'T HALTED.

6. Google Search Ad Customisers

Another useful feature of paid search is Google's ad customisers. These are great for driving awareness and consideration, as they allow for your ad content to be dynamically updated and tailored to variables such as keywords, device type, audience and time of day. Displaying messages which are hyper-personalised for a specific audience will really make your ads stand out. Customisers let a single text ad have hundreds of variations and will show the most relevant adaptation to each potential Open Day attendee. For example, you could add a live countdown to your Open Day event, or tailor different variants of copy to display to either potential students or their parents.

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Contemporary Electric and Hand Poked Tattoos in Edinburgh, Scotland.

7. Programmatic

Whilst programmatic ads can be useful for driving users to conversion, the format's real strength lies in its ability to generate awareness from virtually any corner of the internet. By utilising popular placements on websites that are frequented by your target demographic, you can promote your institution in places where it is likely to generate interest. This makes it an ideal tactic for Open Days, where awareness and action are equally important in the race for registrations, especially as this is still a very new concept.

You can target audiences based on data such as demographics, browsing activity, household income, purchase behaviour and location through Programmatic advertising. And because intended audiences can be reached no matter where they are on the internet, it leaves little doubt as to who will be served your ads. Another reason programmatic should be on your radar is that the bidding takes place automatically in real time, meaning your campaigns are easy to adjust based on performance.

And unlike paid search which targets prospective students who are actively seeking information about your institution, programmatic is well suited for reaching audiences who may have little awareness of your brand but are likely to be receptive to its message. That's because the target audiences for your campaigns are carefully developed well in advance based on data, guaranteeing that your ads will be relevant. As a result, programmatic advertising becomes the catalyst for their conversion journey.

98% OF 18-24 YEAR OLDS WILL STREAM OR DOWNLOAD VIDEO CONTENT AT LEAST ONCE A MONTH.

Nevertheless, copy, visuals, style and tone are all elements that are very much deserving of time and consideration, even when the foundations of programmatic are derived from data and insights. Simultaneously utilising all these pillars of digital marketing will only lead to better results, with optimised creative routinely boosting programmatic performance by 30-50%. This in turn leads to higher viewability rates and an increased ROI. And don't stop there, make sure to incorporate video too, as students can't get enough

of it. 97.6% of 18-24 year olds will stream or download video content at least once per month (need more convincing?), and exploring this avenue via programmatic advertising is a powerful way to captivate students. Also, with the advent of advanced programming languages such as HTML5, this platform has more scope for creative license than ever before. Think recommendation widgets, in-feed and in-video. There are so many creative options because, seriously, programmatic isn't where you swap out your mood boards for excel sheets.

8. Direct Media

Remember that your advertising needn't be restricted to people browsing the internet. You can effectively promote your Open Day by combining your digital and offline channels. 89% of 18-24 year olds who are exposed to an out-of-home campaign can recall it, so it's well worth considering. Take a look at how Anglia Ruskin University welcomed over 500 students for Medicine alone at their summer Open Day using both online and offline channels.

Explore specialist publishers and Video-On-Demand, such as TANMedia, The Guardian, All4 and ITVHub. Not to mention more traditional media such as radio. These trusted providers have all seen a huge spike in activity since lockdown, which is forecasted to increase in the coming year.
On 16 March 2020, The Guardian had record viewing figures of 27.6 million unique users, with over 88 million page views in a single day, the most in their history. One of the top stories, which had 4 million views in less than 24 hours, was an education article

- illustrating that students are still engaged with the education sector and want to know more. Could your institution's messaging be the remedy? That's a lot of eyes on your ads. Check out the positive results we received from advertising on Video on Demand, pre-Covid-19. And VoD platforms have recorded unprecedented impressions since lockdown (ITV saw a +32% increase on the year-to-date average for 16-34-year-old viewing). With this in mind, campaigns should definitely consider VoD tactics.
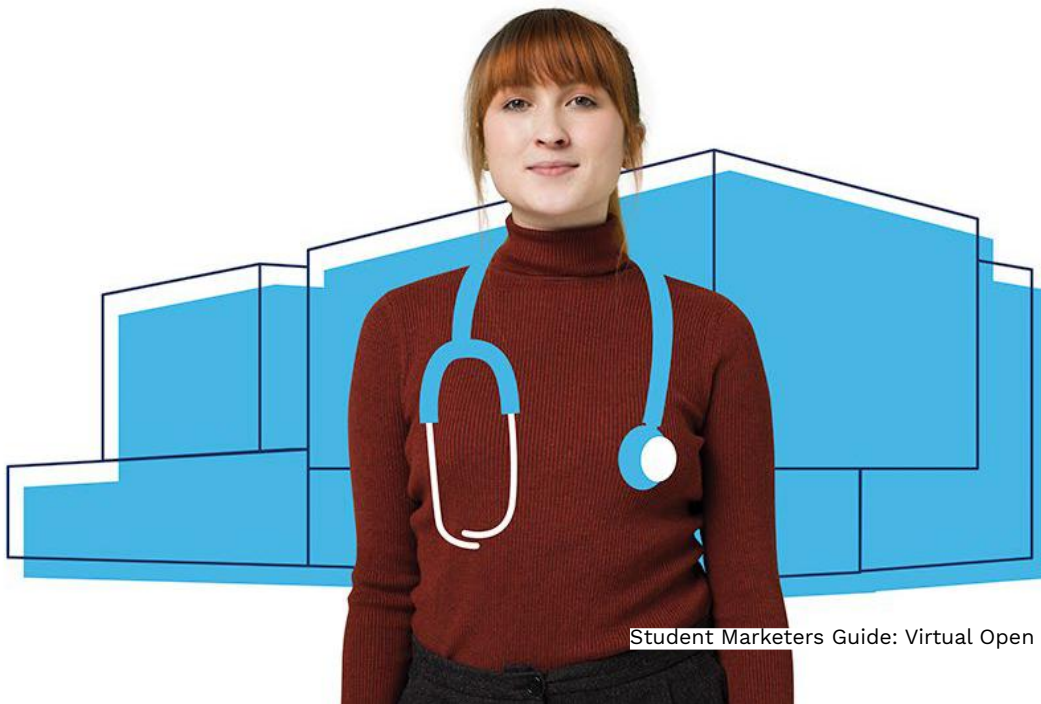
89% OF 18-24 YEAR OLDS WHO ARE EXPOSED TO AN OUT-OF-HOME CAMPAIGN CAN RECALL IT.

This is an unprecedented recruitment cycle and now is the time to adapt your advertising strategy. Investment in long-term brand advertising is going to be key, being in-market with your advertising early is vital (as long as you have the right messaging and targeting) as well as honest, respectful and trustworthy comms.

When using both online and offline advertising in your Open Day campaigns, it's important to make sure the two formats work alongside each other with consistent creative and messaging. Kantar Worldpanel, a company that runs consumer panels, executed simultaneous TV and Facebook campaigns and found that their audience were 1.3 times more likely to purchase when exposed to adverts on both channels, rather than just one.

New developments

And then there are the new developments that you should have on your radar too. These should be intertwined with your virtual Open Day strategy.

1. Dynamic Search Ads

Even well-managed AdWords campaigns containing thousands of keywords are susceptible to missing relevant searches everyday. Students are searching for new solutions to problems that didn't exist six months ago. Dynamic Search Ads can provide a solution to this issue. DSAs pick up on long-tail searches and phrases which cannot be captured through traditional keyword advertising with their organic web crawling technology. Every day, 16% of the searches that occur are ones that Google has never seen before. How many prospective students are you missing out on during your Open Days when not utilising DSAs?
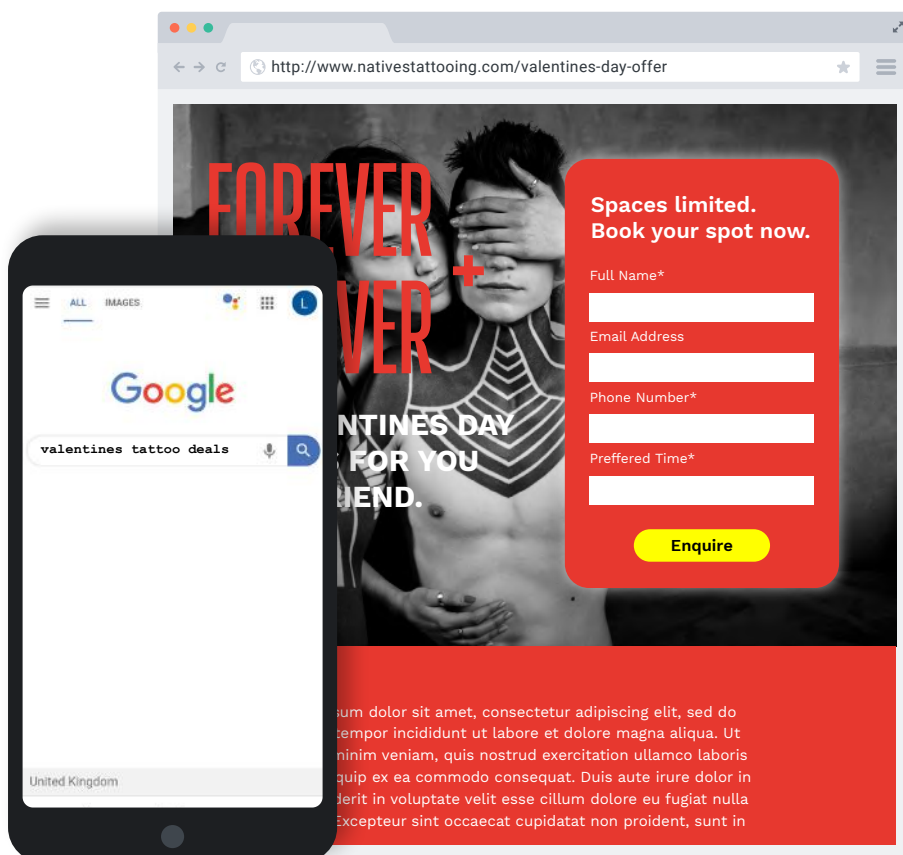
THERE ARE OVER 400 MILLION PEOPLE USING INSTAGRAM STORIES DAILY.

2. Lightweight Motion Video

We know students react better to video format advertising, but what can you do when you don't have any video content ready for your virtual Open Day campaign (because you've never hosted one before)? Fear not, you can opt for Lightweight Motion Video instead. Animate your still image by adding one or two elements of motion in a few seconds and include a call to action card at the end to drive your desired outcome. They're easy to create and cheaper than commissioning video content too. Some advertisers are seeing as much as 5.5x better conversion rates compared to using still ads alone, too. So why not try something new this year?

3. Dynamic Creative

Dynamic creative is a tool that automatically delivers the best combinations of your creative assets (static image, video) and elements (ad copy, CTA buttons). It makes sure that your campaign delivers the ads that resonate best with your target audience to achieve optimum results.

4. Carousel Ads for Stories

There are over 400 million people using Instagram Stories every day, and institutions have the ability to tap into that audience with Carousel Ads. One in four Gen Zers and Millennials actively seek Stories by the products and services they're considering buying, which is why this is a prime strategy to raise awareness for your upcoming virtual Open Days by targeting that segment of your prospective audience. Inspire students to take action and register their space with the now longer Stories.
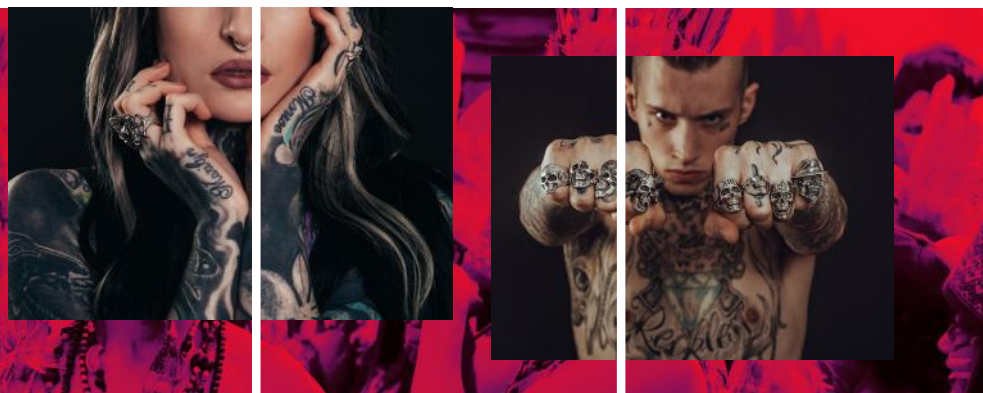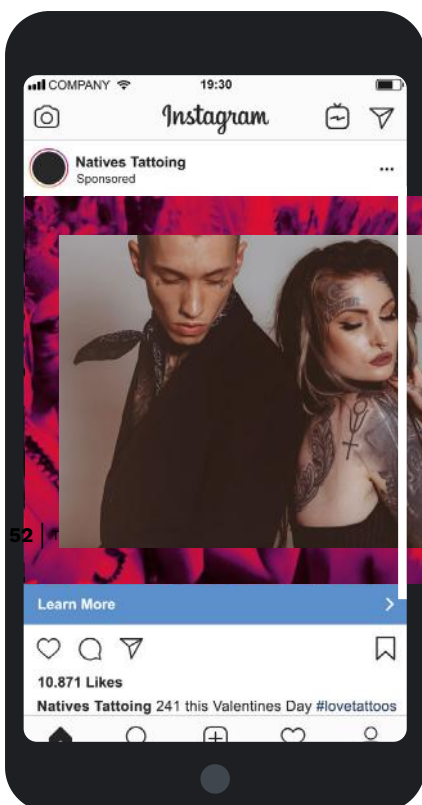
5. YouTube Bumper Ads

A recent survey found that 82% of Generation Z will skip ads as fast as they can if given the option. This is where YouTube bumper ads will become your new best friend. These are six second, unskippable video ads that play before a YouTube video. And while bumpers may only be six seconds long, they can have a huge impact and are brilliant at creating brand awareness and achieving reach.

With everyone at home more, YouTube is currently the go-to source of entertainment, connection and inspiration for millions across the world, with Italy seeing a 20x increase in YouTube watch time in February 2020, USA seeing 10x and UK seeing 6.5x increase. So there's a lot of eyes there.

And research has found that 61% of bumper ads analysed globally drove a significant lift in brand awareness, with an average brand lift of 9% across all campaigns.
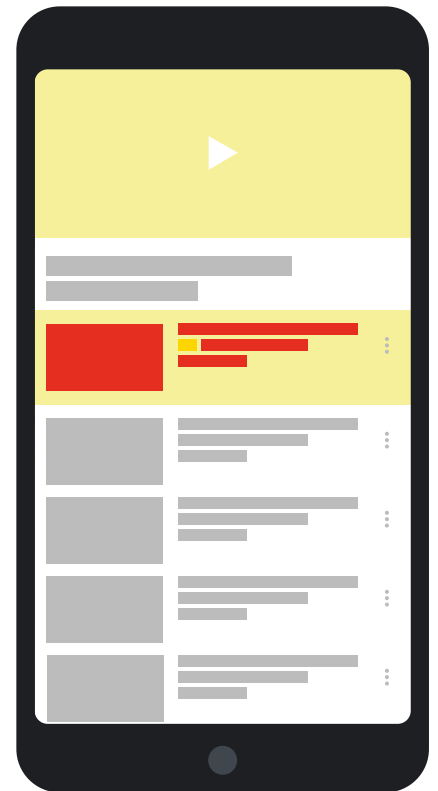
82% OF GENERATION Z WILL SKIP ADS AS FAST AS THEY CAN.

And what do we mean by brand lift...?

6. Brand Lift Studies

Brand lift measures metrics that matter, helping you understand prospective students' perceptions and behaviours throughout the consumer journey, to ensure your campaigns resonate with your audience. Brand lift studies go beyond traditional metrics like impressions and views, and instead can identify and measure positive shifts in student awareness and perception of your institution. This allows you to understand your audience, brand and the impact of your campaign in a more holistic way.

While each one of these tactics and platforms has its own strengths for virtual Open Day campaigns, for optimal results it's best to identify those that are most efficient during the different stages of the funnel (awareness, consideration, intent and decision) whilst opting for a cross-platform and cross-tactic strategy. Supplementing a combination, during the right time to the right people.

With that being said, it's now time to ensure that you're capturing those all important leads in the right way, and make sure you're not letting any slip through the net.

Data capture and lead nurture

So you've done the research, you've considered your positioning in the industry and you've decided how to communicate with your target audience. You've zeroed in on what you stand for and you've made the decision on where you want to tell your story. And you know how you will achieve that reach. In other words, you're getting your individual, unique message out there, to an audience worth talking to.

But now it's pivotal that once these ads pique the interest of individuals, they're being directed to a landing page that has the capability to convert. Which in turn can capture the data to help you later down the line and turbocharge your future ad campaigns. This will enable you to better understand your prospective students and their key influencers, and build personalised nurture campaigns that are 20x more likely to convert. This data capture is even more important for virtual Open Days since these students won't be coming to your campus, so they may need even more touchpoints to convert.

So on that note, let's look into the different ways to drive conversion before, during and after your Open Day. We use the Four A's Framework to construct nurture emails for the pre- and post-event communications to ensure they're delivering the gold home.

TARGETED LANDING PAGES ARE 20X MORE LIKELY TO TO CONVERT.

AUDIENCE

These are the people you're speaking to. Think about what you can do to narrow down your audience by asking specific questions on your virtual Open Day forms. For example, asking them what they intend to study will allow you to tailor your communications using course-level information.

ASSETS

Think about what content you can use in your communications to create excitement around your event and drum up that fear of missing out. No doubt you'll have great content scattered all over your platforms, from landing pages to websites to social channels, which you can pull together to use for your nurture emails.

ACTIONS

This is what you want your audience to do. Virtual Open Days provide you with an incredibly clear and short-term objective; to get people to attend your online event. Keep this in mind when writing your initial set of emails and then expand to include other micro-conversions after your Open Day, such as downloading a prospectus or following your social media. This will help you get to your final goal of increasing applications and enrolments.

ACTIVITIES

The triggers for your emails. For Open Days you'll mainly be thinking about form submissions on your landing pages, or it could be engaging with reminder emails and then deciding whether or not they

SO, HOW DOES THIS WORK IN ACTION?

Before your Open Day

What are your objectives? After people have visited your landing page and filled out your form – what next? You need to focus on moving your potential students from that form submission to getting through the cyber doors of your event.

But how do you match up your nurture emails to this objective? You need to make sure your potential attendees always know the next steps; how to find you, what software they need, who to contact with questions, do they need to wear something other than pyjamas and so on. This may seem dull to include in your follow up emails, but it's integral to know what you're supposed to be doing on the day.

Remember that you can mix these messages up with more aspirational content-driven emails that include information on what life is like at your institution, student stories, and testimonials.

During your virtual Open Day

Make the experience seamless for your guests. Invest in the right meeting tech to give your attendees a great experience - first impressions still count - and ensure you get the most from your Open Day. Make the most of any opportunities to capture new, and also enrich existing, data about your potential students – whilst creating an authentic and welcoming experience for them.

Inspire FOMO with an interactive and engaging line up. Whether lectures via webinar, video tours, live Q&A, Zoom workshops or a virtual quiz in the union, students will be looking to get a feel for your institution, campus and student life just like a traditional Open Day. Consider different streams of activities for different audience segments, so that the experience is personalised and tailored to each individual, ensuring they can visualise themselves attending your institution.

Using technology like Akero will allow you to check your attendees off from a guest list and capture their data during the Open Day, allowing you to track them throughout the event.

And don't forget to integrate your comms and touchpoints throughout the day so that attendees don't miss out on 'headline' sessions, such as VIP alumni workshops or talks from the VC. Reminders via your meeting tech and on social media of what's coming up will maximise your attendees, encourage them to share content and keep them engaged throughout the event

But what about after the Open Day? The hard work doesn't stop there. You'll need to start thinking about converting those attendees to drive applications and enrolments.
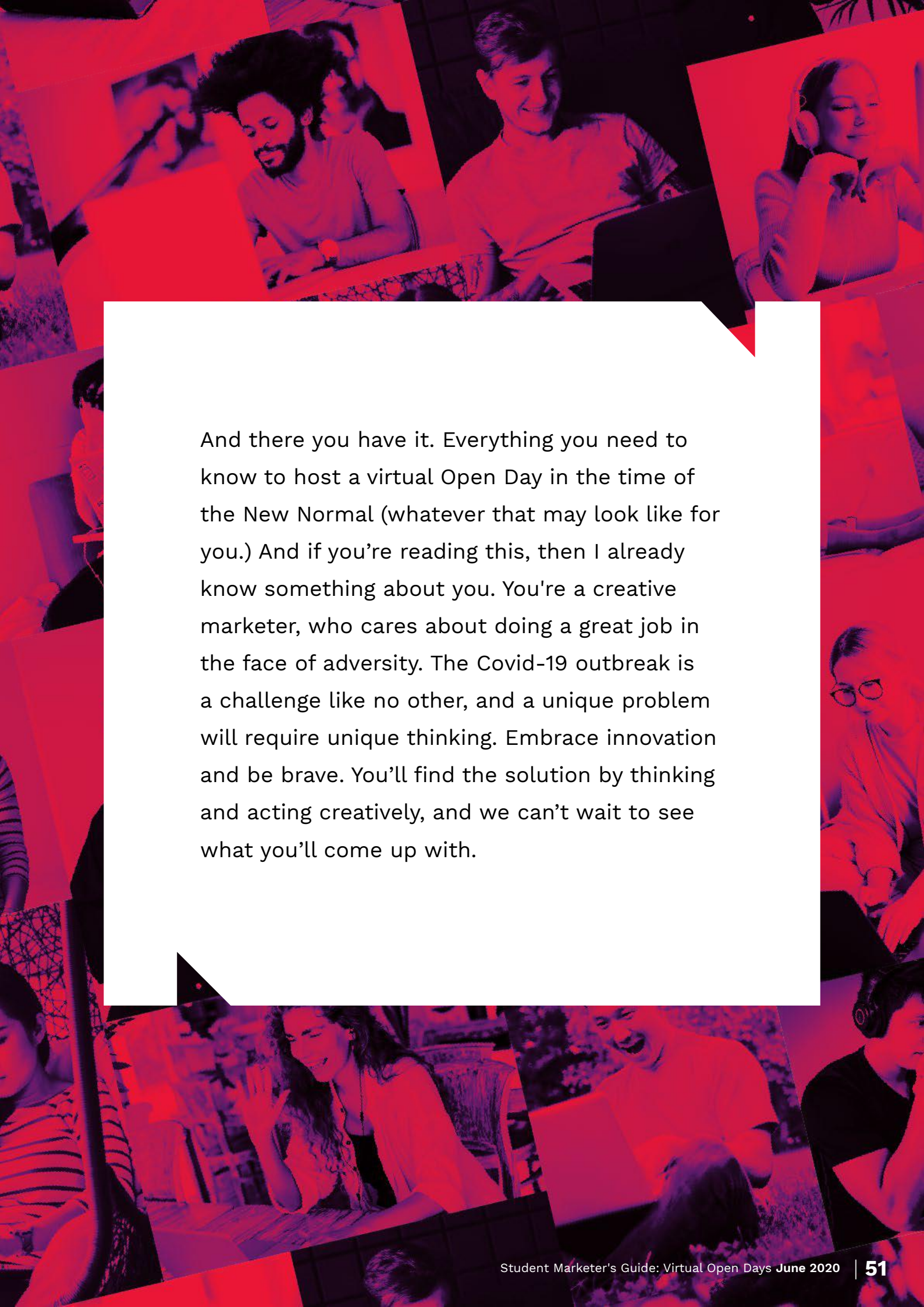
After your virtual Open Day

Engage with your potential students immediately after your Open Day event. You'll have two distinct sets of data; those who attended and those who registered but did not attend. And with this data, you can create all kinds of nurture funnels. For example, for those that attended, why not send them a thank you message and reminders of what's coming up a few hours after they check in? And while you're at it, you can gain some valuable feedback on your event ready for the next Open Day webinar, broadcast, video you plan.

But, most importantly, it's time to start thinking about your next objective – driving these attendees to an application. So make sure they know what to do next. Armed with the data you've collected from your attendees, be personal and treat every prospective student as an individual, not a number. Use the data to create tailored comms to individuals, with information that is relevant to them. Don't send out bulk blanket marketing emails. These are not engaging and lack the personal connection you want to be building with prospective students.

If they're a potential undergraduate student, think about including some advice on writing their personal statement, an online interview and meeting the UCAS deadlines. If they're a potential postgraduate student or international student (or maybe they were a direct applicant), make sure they know how to make an application on your website. Don't let any of your attendees go 'cold' without a follow-up, especially if all contact will be at a (at least two metre) distance for a while. So use the data you've been collecting to divide up your audience and place them into a long-term nurture strategy.

AND MOST IMPORTANTLY, DON'T FORGET THE BASICS; TARGET THE RIGHT PEOPLE, ON THE RIGHT PLATFORMS, AT THE RIGHT TIME, WITH THE RIGHT MESSAGE.

And there you have it. Everything you need to know to host a virtual Open Day in the time of the New Normal (whatever that may look like for you.) And if you're reading this, then I already know something about you. You're a creative marketer, who cares about doing a great job in the face of adversity. The Covid-19 outbreak is a challenge like no other, and a unique problem will require unique thinking. Embrace innovation and be brave. You'll find the solution by thinking and acting creatively, and we can't wait to see what you'll come up with.

Key takeaways

1. **Plan early**

   Start thinking about your virtual Open Day strategy as early as possible (if you haven't done so already, you're late to the party). Review your previous campaigns and look at what worked well, and what you can improve on and evolve this time round.

2. **Influence the influencers**

   We know from the National Clearing Survey that students' university applications are heavily influenced by their friends, parents and teachers – so don't just create messaging that targets the student.

3. **Use your social influencers**

   Identify your micro-influencers, academics, students and alumni with a large and relevant audience on social media, and work with them to create content before your Open Day to drum up excitement and during the event itself. Better yet, get them to host some of the activity.

4. Create platform-appropriate creative

When it comes to creative, one size doesn't fit all. Make sure you're using the right format, size and content for each platform. Snapchat ads need to be vertical and content works better with sound. Instagram videos need to be under a minute, and Facebook videos work better with subtitles.

5. Craft your copy carefully

Create copy that's optimised and engaging to read. And make sure it's appropriate. These are sensitive times and livelihoods have completely changed, so remember that when writing. Ensure you identify your target market and write copy that will resonate with them.

6. Embrace innovation

We've run thousands of Open Day campaigns, and we know what works and what doesn't. But now is the time to experiment with new and innovative platforms and exciting new modes of delivery. Embracing innovation will revolutionise your virtual Open Day.

7. Nurure your prospects

Use Akero lead gen forms to collect data from students who have registered to attend your Open Day. Set up workflows and track the progress of their engagement right until the day of your virtual meeting and beyond...

8. Treasure your data

Once they've attended (or expressed an interest in attending) your Open Day soirée – don't let them slip away. Use the data from year-round campaigns to nurture students through the conversion funnel to through to enrolment.
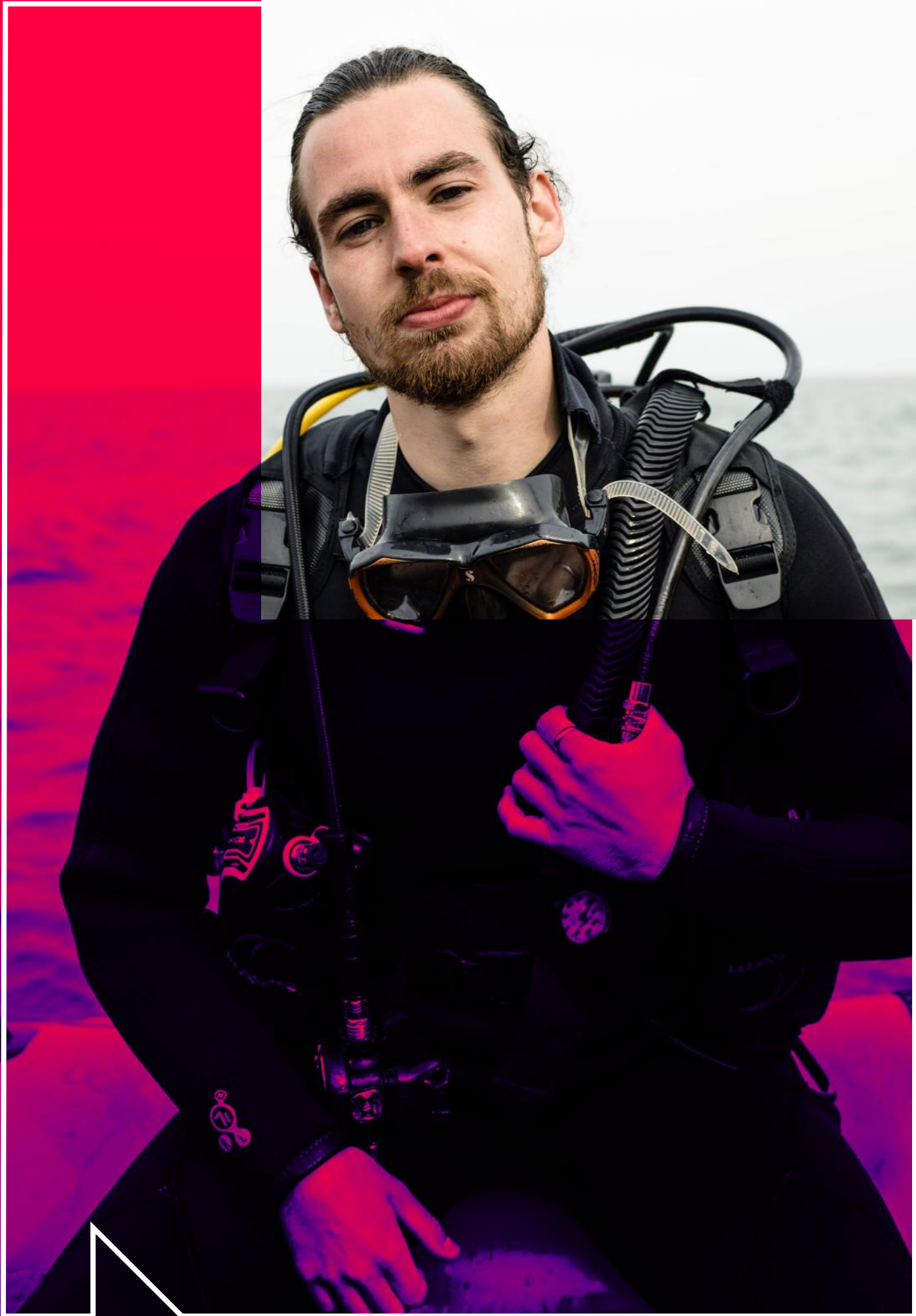
About Natives

We're Natives. The student specialist marketing group.
Connected and curious.

We **think student.** We do, we learn, we refine, and we apply what we've learnt, just like students (and let's face it, we could all be a bit more student).

Impact is something to aspire to - looking beyond impressions, reach, clicks, conversions and inspiring a focus on the bigger picture. More students enquiring, applying, and enrolling.

We can help you understand your brand, your audience, their needs and behaviours with unrivalled insights and data.

We can help you reach students in the right place, on the platforms they're using. Attracting students at the right time, and making a meaningful personalised connection that builds trust and loyalty.

Sound good?
Let's work together

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