

The Paid
Media
Playbook:
10 Insights
From 50+
Campaigns



In higher ed marketing, paid media isn't a nice-to-have; it's mission-critical. But with lean budgets and rising pressure to perform, every dollar has to work harder.

Whether you're generating leads for an online program, driving event registrations, or encouraging prospective students to apply, success depends on smart strategy, scroll-stopping creative, and platform-specific expertise.

That's where we come in. After running dozens of paid media campaigns across Meta, LinkedIn, TikTok, and more, we're cracking open the vault to share the insights you actually need. **No filler—just what's working, what's not, and how to improve your next campaign.**

INSIDE, YOU'LL FIND

- 10 takeaways backed by real campaign data
- The top conversion drivers by platform
- How to change up your ads to increase clicks
- Ideas for form-fill incentives & so much more

It's snackable, practical, and packed with insight. Here we go!

50+
CAMPAIGNS

700M
IMPRESSIONS

30+
MEDIA CHANNELS

#1 The top-converting platform across all campaigns we ran was... *Meta.*

When it came to driving action, Meta (Facebook + Instagram) consistently outperformed every other platform. Across the board, it wasn't just strong—it was the clear leader in conversions.

WHY META WORKED

- **AUDIENCE TARGETING POWER:** Meta's advanced ad tools enabled highly precise targeting, reaching the audiences most likely to engage and convert.
- **VISUAL STORYTELLING:** Beautiful campus shots and graphic statics with bold text resonate best. (More on that later!)
- **MOBILE-FIRST ENVIRONMENT:** With most users scrolling on their phones, Meta provided seamless, on-the-go conversion opportunities.

TAKEAWAY

If your budget is limited and you want to build reach and maximize conversions, Meta should be your first investment. Its precise targeting capabilities allow you to zero in on the right audiences. Prioritize ad sets that speak directly to parents, and lean into creative that feels personal and relatable.

68%

MORE
CONVERSIONS
THAN THE
2ND HIGHEST
CONVERTING
PLATFORM
(SEARCH ENGINE
MARKETING)

98%

OF CONVERSIONS
CAME FROM THE
PARENT AUDIENCE

#2 Sponsored content boosted awareness... *and conversions.*

QUICK DEFINITION

WHAT IS SPONSORED CONTENT?

It's an article or feature that looks and feels like editorial content, but it's paid for by a brand (in this case, a college or university). It usually lives on news sites, lifestyle platforms, or niche publications that your audience already trusts.

We typically think of sponsored content as top-of-funnel—great for:

- Building brand awareness
- Positioning the school as an authority on a particular topic
- Reaching new audiences in an authentic, less salesy way

WHAT WE ACTUALLY SAW OVER TIME

After running dozens of campaigns over a few years, we noticed something surprising:

The same sponsored content pieces that began with brand awareness started to drive conversions.

186
CONVERSIONS



Sponsored content we ran with Apartment Therapy on behalf of New York School of Interior Design

WHY SPONSORED CONTENT WORKS

TRUST COMPOUNDS: Seeing your institution in a credible editorial setting (not just an ad) builds familiarity. When prospects do get to the decision stage, they're more likely to remember and trust you.

EVERGREEN VALUE: Unlike short-term ads, sponsored content lives on, often ranking in search and being reshared. So it keeps working long after the campaign ends.

STRONGER INTENT SIGNALS: Those who click on long-form sponsored content are already showing higher interest—and those visitors may convert later, even if not immediately.

TAKEAWAY

Invest in a sponsored content strategy with a team that can research the best placements, negotiate added value, write exceptional content, and measure results.

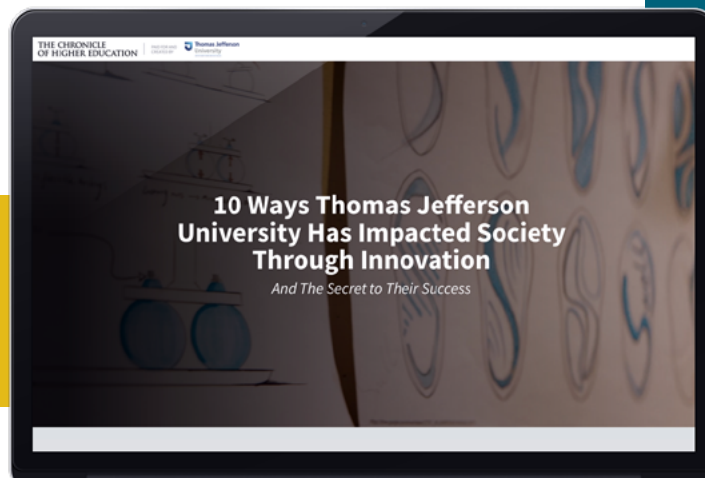


TOTAL IMPRESSIONS

2,710,658

OVERDELIVERED BY
171% ON
GUARANTEED
1 MILLION
IMPRESSIONS!

Sponsored content we ran with The Chronicle of Higher Ed on behalf of Hudson Valley Community College



TOTAL CLICKS

2,000+

AVERAGE TIME ON
ARTICLE PAGE:
4 MIN 23 SEC
(BENCHMARK
~ 2 MIN)

Sponsored content we ran with The Chronicle of Higher Ed on behalf of Thomas Jefferson University

#3 Undergraduate conversions were highest during the month of...*November.*

Students don't convert at the same pace year-round—certain months drive higher action. Throughout our campaigns, we found that undergraduate conversions were highest in November, while graduate conversions were highest in January.

WHY NOVEMBER FOR UNDERGRAD?

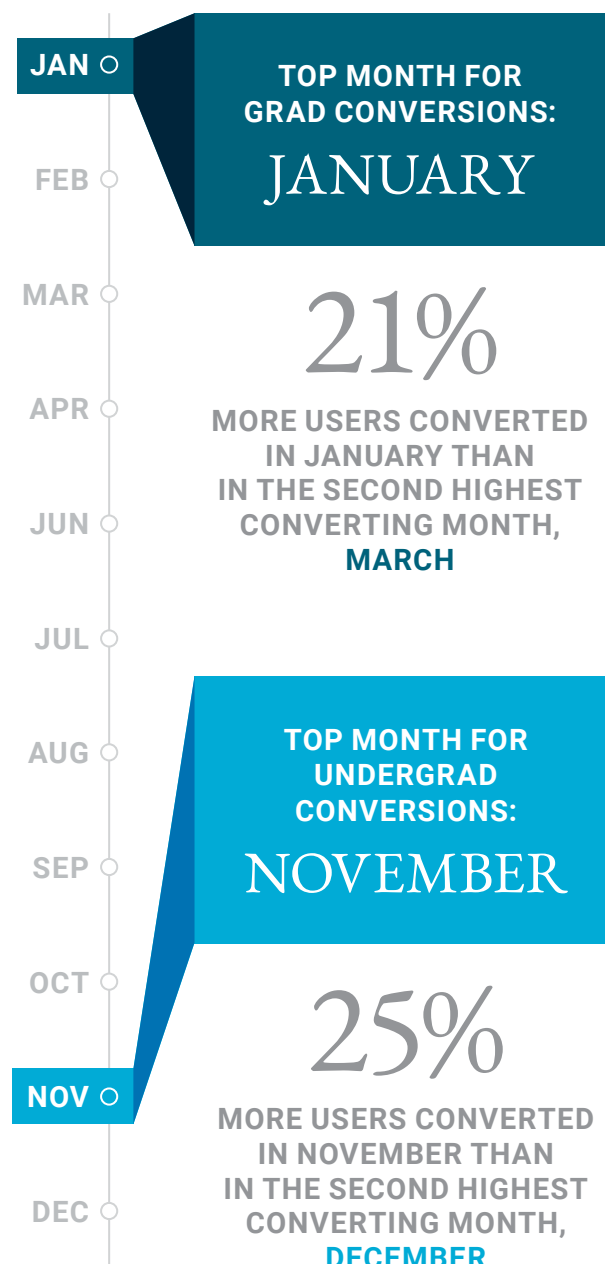
- Seniors are submitting Early Action and Early Decision applications (deadlines often Nov 1 or Nov 15).
- Both juniors and seniors are actively researching and visiting campuses.
- Many students are starting or finalizing Regular Decision applications.

WHY JANUARY FOR GRAD?

- January benefits from the “new year, new career goals” mindset.

TAKEAWAY

Aligning campaigns with these natural decision-making cycles—November for undergrads, January for grads—can maximize conversions by meeting students exactly when they're most motivated to act.



#4 The images that performed best in ad creative were... *graphics & campus shots.*

While it may feel natural to feature smiling student faces in every ad, our data told a different story. In fact, ads that leaned too heavily on stock-style portraits underperformed. Why? Because they didn't resonate. Prospective students and parents have seen those same poses and smiles a thousand times before.

WHAT WORKED BETTER

- **GRAPHICS:** Bold text treatments, icons, and branded designs stood out in crowded feeds, delivering the message instantly.
- **CAMPUS SHOTS:** Every school has labs. What does yours have that is different, beautiful, or interesting? A sparkling waterfront, a horse stable, student-run rooftop garden, or an epic climbing wall? Show it off!

TAKEAWAY

Ditch the usual shot of three students under a tree (or any students for that matter) and try something else!



#5 Traditional media boosted search volume.

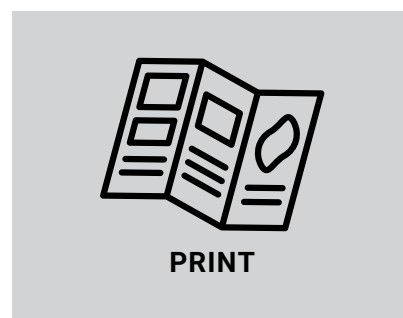
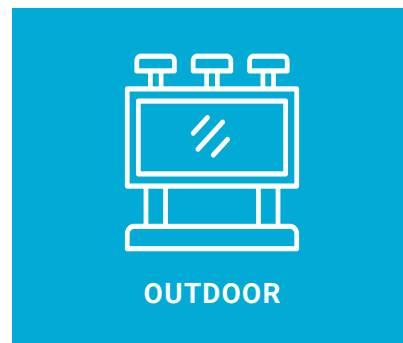
Digital may get the spotlight, but traditional channels played a powerful supporting role in our campaigns. Whenever we layered in traditional media—TV, radio, outdoor, or print—we saw a direct lift in how often people turned to Google to learn more.

IMPACT

- **20-50% increase** in paid search volume on average when traditional media was running.
- **TV drove the most significant increase** in search volume, followed by radio, outdoor, and print.
- The effect varied by channel, but the trend was clear: **traditional drove curiosity, and curiosity drove search.**

TAKEAWAY

Traditional media isn't dead, it's a catalyst. Use it to fuel digital demand. Pairing traditional with paid search creates a multiplier effect that keeps your brand top-of-mind and easy to find.



#6 The creative units that drove the most conversions were...*images*.

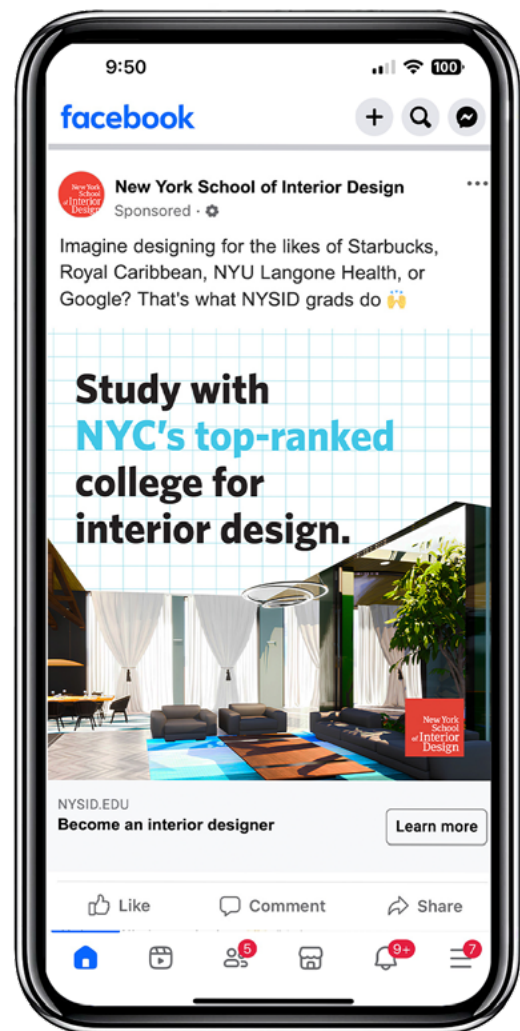
Despite the buzz around video and carousels, it was static images that came out on top for conversions in our campaigns.

WHY STATIC WORKED

- **SPLIT-SECOND DELIVERY:** Images communicate instantly—no need for viewers to pause or press play.
- **STRONG IN SMALL SPACES:** Perfect for crowded feeds where attention spans are short.
- **EFFORTLESS ENGAGEMENT:** No action required beyond a click.

TAKEAWAY

Don't overlook simplicity. Static images not only convert but also give you more flexibility to test, pivot, and extend your campaigns with minimal friction. When creative fatigue sets in, static images are faster, easier, and more cost-effective to refresh and optimize compared to video or carousel units.



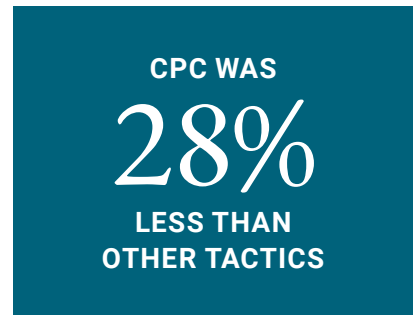
#7 Meta's top targeting tactic in our campaigns was... *Advantage+.*

Advantage+ is Meta's AI or Machine Learning Ad Tool. It uses AI to find and prioritize the users most likely to convert, and we've seen it outperform more traditional targeting in both efficiency and results.

When using Meta's Advantage+, we saw an average improvement of about 20-30% in overall performance, including conversions and costs.

TAKEAWAY

Meta's Advantage+ AI targeting consistently outperforms traditional tactics, driving 20-30% stronger results with lower CPCs and CPAs—making it a must-use tool for efficient conversions.



#8 For grad programs, the platform that drove the highest quality leads was... *LinkedIn.*

While Meta excelled at volume, LinkedIn consistently delivered prospects who were more advanced in their decision-making and more aligned with program goals.

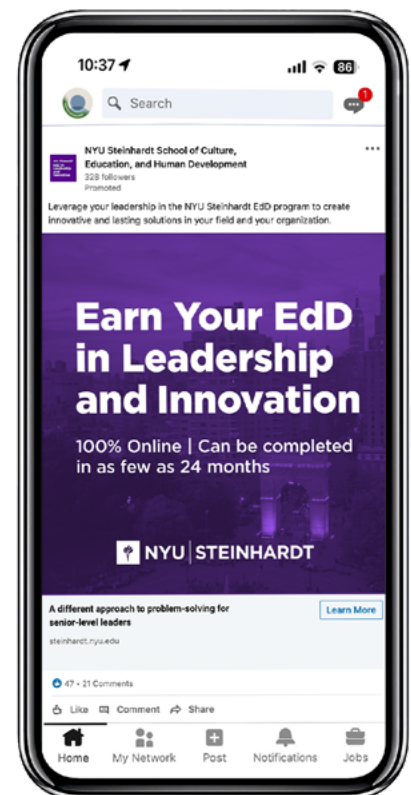
No surprise when you think about it: On LinkedIn, you're reaching professionals while they're in a career-focused mindset, often during a work scroll. They're not just doomscrolling or liking vacation photos. They're open to next steps.

WHY LINKEDIN?

- **PROFESSIONAL MINDSET:** Users are in career-growth mode, making them naturally receptive to grad school opportunities.
- **ADVANCED TARGETING:** Job titles, industries, and education filters allowed us to reach exactly the right audience.

TAKEAWAY

For graduate programs, invest in LinkedIn as your quality lead driver. Pair it with other platforms for awareness and reach, but rely on LinkedIn when you need inquirers and applicants who are serious and ready to act.



#9 When included in the media mix, the platform that drove the most traffic to landing pages was... *TikTok*.

TIKTOK = LANDING PAGE TRAFFIC POWERHOUSE

When included in the media mix, TikTok drove the most traffic to landing pages, accounting for **60% of all LP visits on average**.

TikTok traffic skews younger (13-17), driving high clicks and strong engagement. **Average time on page was 55 seconds**, just below paid search and above display.

Top-performing TikTok creative generated **12K+ clicks**, the highest across all platforms this year.

Beyond traffic, older parent audiences drove the most conversions. In one spring campaign, **TikTok converted more users** than paid search and display combined.



TAKEAWAY

TikTok isn't just for awareness—it drives both engagement among younger audiences and meaningful leads among older audiences.

#10 Incentives *work.*

A simple truth: people are more likely to click, sign up, and follow through when there's something extra in it for them. Adding an incentive to your ad or landing page can be the nudge that turns interest into action. Think about it: You'd be more likely to fill out a form if there was a perk waiting on the other side, right?

INCENTIVES TO TRY

- **VISIT GRANT:** Offer \$1,000 toward tuition if a student tours and ultimately enrolls.
- **CAMPUS SWAG:** T-shirts, water bottles, or totes branded with your college.
- **COLLEGE COACHING SESSION:** A free one-on-one session with an admissions or career advisor.
- **BOOKSTORE VOUCHER:** A \$25 credit to spend on gear next time they're on campus.
- **CHARITABLE DONATION:** Contribute to a cause in the student's name.



TAKEAWAY

Even a small incentive can tip the scales, turning interest into clicks, sign-ups, and enrollments.

Ready to take your marketing to the next level?

Drop us a note at info@ccanewyork.com.

We'd love to learn more about your challenges and
explore how CCA can help.

