TOPcast Episode 40: “Boost Your Online Program Enrollment with this One Tip!” (aka Marketing of Online Programs)

Kelvin Thompson: From the University of Central Florida's Center for Distributed Learning, I'm Kelvin Thompson.

Tom Cavanagh: And I'm Tom Cavanagh.

Kelvin: And you are listening to TOPcast, the Teaching Online Podcast. Sup Tom?

Tom: I’m listening to TOPcast, even as we speak.

Kelvin: *(laughter)* Tom, you’re making TOPcast.

Tom: *(laughter)* We’ve had this conversation before.

Kelvin: Every time, it seems like.

Tom: So, we end up talking a lot—

Kelvin: We do talk a lot. Yeah.

Tom: —about the weather at the top of the show. Often.

Kelvin: So you going to move that to the end?

Tom: Maybe. Or maybe throughout! We’ll just do a total weather update.

Kelvin: *(laughter)* I’ll leave occasionally and check outside.

Tom: *(laughter)* Well, so as I walked up from the parking lot—because I was on campus and now we’re off campus in the bunker—

Kelvin: I feel safe.

Tom: Yeah. You know how hot and humid it is?

Kelvin: In here? Yes.

Tom: Yeah, in here is pretty bad, but now you say, “How hot and humid is it?”

Kelvin: How hot and humid is it, Tom?

Tom: It’s so hot and humid out there that I’m surprised you’re not asking me why I’m wearing all of my scuba gear at this moment. *(long pause)* Boy, that fell flat.

Kelvin: Okay…
Tom: It is so hot and humid I swam in here from the parking lot.
Kelvin: Boy, are my flippers tired.
Tom: Yeah. Boy, are my flippers tired.
Kelvin: Something.
Tom: It’s really ridiculous out there.
Kelvin: It’s ridiculous in here. Are you kidding? (laughter)
Tom: Yeah.
Kelvin: It’s ripe all over.
Tom: Maybe we’ll ask Tim to fix that in post.
Kelvin: He doesn’t know where the…Well, he does know where the edit button is.
Tom: You know what we need is a laugh track. That’ll make me seem so much funnier.
Kelvin: (laughter) Yeah, because that’s how that works. Gilligan was always so funny because of all of the people laughing.
Tom: Yes! The live studio audience. Hey, I’ve worked with the TV. I know how that works. Alright, well, why don’t you save me with some coffee?
Kelvin: Yeah, I’m happy to do that. Let me pour you some here, and then we’ll talk about the coffee shtick. I don’t know if we’ve been remiss in saying that if you’re new to TOPcast that we actually start with some brew. We start with some coffee and try to make a connection.
Tom: Yeah, can we reset that, as they say in radio land? Let’s just reset that.
Kelvin: Sure.
Tom: So, for those who don’t know, Kelvin is somewhat obsessed with coffee.
Kelvin: That’s maybe the truest statement you’ve made about it.
Tom: Yeah, and probably as funny as what I said before.
Kelvin: Yeah.
Tom: And so, this is part of the TOPcast deal. The idea is just a couple of dudes sitting around over a cup of coffee talking about online and digital learning.
Kelvin: That’s right. We say collegial conversation.

Tom: Collegial conversation.


Tom: So, grab your own cup, pull up a chair, and join in the conversation. We won’t hear you—

Kelvin: But you’ll hear us.

Tom: But go ahead and join in!

Kelvin: That’s right. Although, if you emailed us, you could share your thoughts with us.

Tom: Or send us a voice file or an audio file.

Kelvin: That’s right. topcast@ucf.edu. Hit record on your smartphone. Email it in to us. It’s great. You probably want to know what you’re drinking here, Tom.

Tom: Right, because I know it’s not just any old coffee that we get. Not some random brew that you pull out of the drawer. There’s a lot of thought that goes into these coffee selections.

Kelvin: It’s about as much thinking as I do, Tom.

Tom: I’ve described you as my own personal coffee sommelier.

Kelvin: I wish you could do better, but hey, this is what you got. So, what do you want for free? So, as our long-time listeners know, I love a good single-origin coffee. We’ve gone through a spate of blends it seems like, and this one is a Burundi from Central Africa. Had to look up where Burundi was. This is called a “transitional” coffee because the roaster is working with a collective of local farmers to get it through the—what is apparently—apparently arduous, fair trade certification process. (“They’re working on it.”) I thought this coffee was appropriate for today’s episode, though, not because of where it came from originally but because of how I got it.

So, bear with me for a second here. I was in a new cafe awhile back—that happens—and, as I often do when I find a delightful coffee—and I often do find a delightful coffee—I tweeted a photo with a positive word about the coffee and the roaster. I do that. However, a day or so later, I got a tweet back from the coffee company—which was Bongo Java Roasting—saying “Glad you liked it. Give us your address, and we’ll send some more coffee.”

Tom: Yet another LEGO piece in your vast scam to acquire free coffee.

Kelvin: I know! We’ve got coffee coming in left and right here. It’s kind of good. I didn’t want to tweet out my address, so I said, “If you follow me, I’ll follow you, and
I’ll direct message you.” I got them the address and was like, “Well, maybe somebody will follow through. Maybe they won’t. It’s hard to say.” About a week later, I opened up a kind of heavy box to find a selection (three bags!) of whole-bean coffee—different kinds of coffees—and a beautiful—oh, I meant to bring it in here. I’ll have to show you afterwards—handwritten note from Bongo Java’s operations director Laura Feiberg thanking me for the “Twitter love” and presenting me with the coffee. She has lovely handwriting.

Tom: That’s a lost art, the actual handwritten note.
Kelvin: I know! I kept it, Tom! I kept the thing! It’s sitting there next to my coffee maker.
Tom: We should scan that.
Kelvin: We could do that. So, just want to say thank you Laura for the coffee love! It’s all been tasty! I’ve checked out the website, and Bongo Java Roasting in Nashville, TN, does have a great selection of single-origin and blended coffees. You should check them out if you’re looking for some new high-quality coffees to try. So, Tom, how’s the coffee?
Tom: It’s good! I like it much.
Kelvin: Can you see the connection with today’s episode?
Tom: I can see the connection.
Kelvin: That’s good. I’ve been worried. My Kungfu’s been weak lately.
Tom: (laughter) Your tenuous connections. So, yes, I do think I get it, and it has to do with the tweeting and the promotional aspect of it. It’s been kind of an odd conversation you and I have been having right now.
Kelvin: Every single one is kind of an odd conversation!
Tom: Odder than normal, because we actually have a third person in the room who’s like an audience watching this. We’ve only done this once before with somebody else actually in the room.
Kelvin: That’s right, and he was sort of paid for us as a student worker so he resisted any efforts to leave or to make too much fun of us. (laughter)
Tom: He had no choice. (laughter) But we are really pleased to have our colleague from UCF here, Courtney Borton, who serves as associate director of marketing for UCF Online, which is our exclusively online option for students who want access to our 80+ online programs who don’t need to come to campus and have that sort of experience. It’s sort of our virtual campus, and Courtney is in charge of all the marketing efforts associated with that. So, welcome, Courtney!
Kelvin: Welcome Courtney!

Courtney Borton: Thank you! Thank you for having me.

Kelvin: Have some coffee!

Tom: Have some coffee! Yeah! You got poured a cup.

Kelvin: We’ll snap a photo because you’re drinking out of that “I Heart TOPcast” mug.

Courtney: My TOPcast mug. Well, from a branding perspective, you have to represent.

Tom: Yeah, and right before we clicked record, we were told…Is it today or tomorrow your two-year anniversary?

Courtney: Tomorrow! Two years!

Tom: Wow. So, in the world of podcast time traveling, you will have already been here two years by the time people listen to this.

Kelvin: Yeah, that’s how we roll.

Courtney: Time flies when you’re having fun, right?

Tom: It does!

Kelvin: Indeed!

Tom: Feels like you’ve been here forever like the rest of us. You’ve made a very good and important impact.

Courtney: Thank you.

Tom: Alright, so to kind of set this up. The idea behind having Courtney come in and talk to us today—

Kelvin: We couldn’t think of anything to talk about.

Courtney: I figured.

Tom: Well, Courtney and I co-presented last fall at the OLC Accelerate conference and we talked about the launch of the UCF Online virtual campus. A big piece of that was the marketing side of things, so it was sort of half of the behind the scenes, how I worked the system to get it approved and half of it was the external how do we attract and recruit students?

Kelvin: Now, you’d be too modest to say this, but I slipped into that session in the back. It was underway about two or three minutes, and I could just stand in the back of
the room. It was packed. People were interested. It ended and people didn’t leave. They were lining up to talk to you guys. It was interesting.

Tom: It was actually a really good session! We both got a lot of great feedback. We enjoyed talking. It was a nice-sized room and it was full, which is always a good sign. One thing I noticed is there were a lot more people lined up to talk to Courtney than there were lined up to talk to me. So, that’s fine, but it made me think this is a subject people are interested in, and we have an expert on staff here with us. So, for a little bit of background, when we decided to launch UCF Online—well, relaunch it or rebrand it, because we’ve always had online programs, but not in the kind of intentional way that we have now, and we’ve never marketed until this new rebranding. We were considering going with an OPM, which is an online program management company where usually the model is a commercial partner will upfront a bunch of costs, handle all the marketing, in many cases the enrollment services and even in some cases they’ll help you with instructional design and other kinds of things, and then there’s like a ten-year agreement where you have a revenue share of the tuition that pays back their initial investment and both of you are supposed to make money.

Courtney: Or sometimes a shorter timeframe.

Tom: Yeah. Sometimes that’s negotiable. The percentage of the rev share split is sometimes negotiable. Courtney knows a lot about this because she comes from an OPM.

Courtney: I did.

Kelvin: That shall remain nameless.

Tom: You can guess, though. So, anyway, we were debating whether or not we should sign with one of these companies and we had many that were very much interested in working with us, and at the end of the day, for a lot of reasons, we elected not to and to try and build that capacity internally, and I think that was the right decision for us. There are a lot of good reasons to go with an OPM, but for us, it made sense not to. In addition to expanding some of the student support services that we already did but not at the scale that we currently do it, the area that we needed help with was marketing, because we did not ever market our online programs, and we didn’t have any sort of an intentional online marketing strategy nor any sort of resources, and our resources are small. Courtney would be the first to tell you how small our resources are to market, but she does a great job with what she has.

Kelvin: She does a lot with a little.

Tom: The idea then was how do we build that marketing capacity internally? Courtney was our answer.

Courtney: No pressure.
Tom: Yeah, no pressure, Courtney. Just bring all these students in. So, maybe we could start with some of the big picture, framing questions. Why is marketing an important part of serving online students? One theory is you make awesome programs, you have high academic quality, and that you’ve got a good institutional reputation. Why should I spend all this money and compete with the for-profits? We have friends in for-profits and we know they do a good job, but that’s a perception that we often hear. So, why is it important?

Courtney: Well, when we think about online programs, there are so many of them and more and more programs are being launched every year in institutions. I think here at UCF alone we recently launched almost five in the last year or so. That’s just UCF. When you think big picture, national—forget about international—more and more institutions are launching online programs which is more competition. So, these institutions are basically going out there and just trying to get the attention of these students. So, what makes UCF different from those institutions? At the end of the day, what we’re really trying to do is connect students with the right programs and to let them know that this is available. So, as these advertisements are out there or when they’re searching, there’s so much noise. There’s a lot of noise out there. How do we reach students that are a good fit here at UCF? They may not be able to come to campus, but they want to be a part of the UCF family. How do we reach them and connect them when another institution may come in that may not be such a great fit? So, I always tell people—and we have these conversations a lot with colleagues and friends that I have that work in other institutions—why is it important? Well, if you want to play, you’re going to have to compete. That’s really what it comes down to.

Tom: So, what makes recruiting and marketing for an online program different than the general brand and other kinds of freshmen admission marketing that the university does? I know that you and your colleagues within the marketing department have been very intentional that UCF Online is kind of a subset of and consistent with UCF, not as a separate thing. I wonder if you might want to talk a little bit about that.

Courtney: Sure. So, two parts to that. When we talk about a subset of UCF, there’s a lot of institutions that at times have branched off almost into their own online university of the university. Tom knows this. In our initial conversations and even talking with the president and the provosts here at UCF, we wanted to not do that. UCF Online is simply a modality. It’s an offering. It’s a way to provide additional access to these students, and it stays under that UCF brand so when that people go to our website or they see other messaging, they know this is UCF. Here at UCF, we take pride in doing this for many, many, many years. We take pride in the quality of education. We never want to have any type of perception that that’s being compromised. So, you know, for us—and again, some institutions have different strategic plans within that—our plan was to make sure that it stays under the UCF umbrella with everything that we do. Then going back, it really came down to the differences between freshmen students and maybe some of the on-campus types of recruitment and how that is different. We often use the term the adult learner. That’s the term that we use quite often. Some other institutions may call them career-oriented.
Tom: Non-traditional.

Courtney: Non-traditional. Those types. So, for us, really kind of thinking in the adult learner mindset and that’s saying that our freshmen are not adults. They’re under 18. But these are the people that have been in life for a little bit. They may be already in their careers. They may be motivated to try to move up or they may have taken a break and they’re ready to come back to school, and because of the competition, those adult learners are used to a higher level of customer service. They’re used to maybe having more of that concierge high touch type of approach opposed to some of our freshmen that are going to have to submit applications, go through the chain, come to campus, and meet with advisors. These people can’t do that. They either don’t have time or they’re place-bound in certain areas. So, how do we—from a recruitment perspective—reach out to them and have that hand? Here’s the hand to reach out to and help them through that process.

Tom: Well, that might actually be a good transition to the next topic I wanted to talk about which is what you’ve educated me on as the funnel. I guess anybody who’s got a marketing background understands all this, but this was all sort of new to me. If you pictured a funnel or an upside-down triangle with the fat end being all your potential students and then narrowing it down to actual enrollments, you’ve broken it down—at least in our presentation that we co-did last fall—into a couple of different categories. I wonder if you could describe some of those.

Courtney: Sure. So, when we talk about the top. So, the top of the funnel: that’s where all of the people are inquiring. So, that could be our marketing efforts, our website…

Tom: The fat end of the funnel as I think of it.

Courtney: Right. The fat end. So, here’s the door. So that’s the way that I try to position it. Here’s the door to come in. So, what happens after that? That’s kind of the awareness side of the funnel. So, promoting awareness through UCF Online, we’ve been really trying to push that awareness through our marketing initiatives that we’ve been launching over the last couple years. Then, as that—and I call it almost a perspective student journey. The journey of a student going through this. What is the interest? That’s kind of the lead generation side of it. So, they’re coming in through the funnel, they inquire whether it’s through a lead form that’s on one of our pages or even maybe a different form on the application side. There’s many, many doors that online students are able to go through.

Kelvin: Now, some of our listeners might not quite be familiar with a term like lead. What do we mean by lead? Lead generation? Lead form?

Courtney: So, when we talk about a lead, oftentimes that’s a student who’s inquiring. So, that’s one person. A person who’s inquiring. They’re filling out their name in a form saying, “Hey, I’m really interested in this program. Here’s my contact information.”

Kelvin: It might go somewhere, it might not.
Courtney: Exactly.

Tom: Now I’ve heard it said about leads that you can have a lot, high quality, or cheap. Pick two.

Courtney: (laughter)

Kelvin: A lot, high quality, or cheap. Pick two.

Tom: Or cost effective. I don’t know. Is that generally true? I didn’t hear that from you.

Courtney: (laughter) I was going to say, that didn’t come from me. But, that comes down to when we say quality, what we’re really talking about is a qualified student.

Tom: Right.

Courtney: So, for us, at the end of the day, we don’t have an unlimited budget here.

Kelvin: What?! (laughter)

Tom: It’s a subject of many of Courtney and my meetings.

Courtney: How far can we stretch the dollar?

Kelvin: It snapped a long time ago, Tom. (laughter) It will not stretch any further. I need another one.

Courtney: I’m taping it. (laughter) So, how far can we stretch that dollar? So quality over quantity all day, every day, and I would even go as far to say even if you had an unlimited budget that should be the push.

Tom: Yeah, I would agree, because you don’t want to spend a bunch of money attracting students who are not likely to ever enroll.

Courtney: Exactly.

Kelvin: Wastes everybody’s time, right?

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: Who wants that?

Tom: So, I interrupted you. Sorry.

Courtney: No, no problem! And really, kind of going down that funnel, as it gets skinnier and skinnier, that’s the consideration. So, what we call nurturing and engagement. How are we engaging with these students after they come and walk through that door? And again, this is all online. This isn’t something where we’re like, “Hey! Schedule an appointment! We can meet with you!” This is all online,
so, we’re really trying to figure out how would they like to be communicated with? Is it through email? Is it through chat? Is it through text? I mean, there’s so many different methods out there now. We’re really trying to understand how do we engage that audience? From there, evaluating, working with them to figure out is this a good fit or is this not a good fit because we don’t want our programs and the program directors spending a lot of time with these students that may not necessarily be a good fit for them. So, really trying to, again, funnel that out and help them get connected with a program that meets their needs and then obviously the goal of them becoming a student.

Tom: Cool. I’m going to put you on the spot. I think I’ve asked you this question before and I think the answer is it depends.

Kelvin: Always a safe bet.

Tom: Is there a rule of thumb ratio? X number of leads should lead to Y number of students?

Courtney: It depends.

Tom: It depends. (laughter)

Courtney: (laughter)

Tom: Of course. Well, tell me what it depends on.

Courtney: It depends on several factors. So, when we talk about X amount of leads should—and we use the word convert a lot. X amount of leads should convert to X amount of students. Oftentimes, what channel aren’t we talking about? Where are they coming in from our marketing? Are they coming in from our website? Are they coming in from a very specific targeted campaign that’s only going after students with a bachelor’s in nursing that want to get their master’s in nursing?

Tom: Left-handed, green-eyed students who live in this zip code.

Courtney: The unicorn. You know, how targeted is that? So, I always say the analogy and explanation that I go is the wider the net, probably a little bit of the smaller conversion that you’re going to have because you’re going after such a wide area. So, the more targeted, the higher the conversion rate because you’re being intentional about your messaging, you’re being intentional about who you’re reaching out to, and you’re really trying to be targeted on what that outcome would be for them.

Kelvin: Back to Tom’s kind of quip about pick two. The more targeted you are, seemingly the more costly that is in terms of hours of investment.

Tom: The more high quality and more costly they probably are.
Courtney: Exactly.

Tom: Yeah. Well, we mentioned lead and we mentioned the word convert. There’s a whole lexicon of terms that I’ve become familiar with in the last two years working with Courtney, and I wonder if we can sort of break down a couple of these and why they matter.

Kelvin: That’s probably helpful.

Tom: So, the first one is SEO.

Kelvin: “See-yo”.

Tom: S-E-O.

Courtney: Just SEO it. *(laughter)*

Tom: So, that’s search engine optimization. I wonder if you could just give us a brief definition of that.

Courtney: So, depending on who you’re talking to, search engine optimization I basically say everybody searching on Google. So, they’re typing in certain things. “Online nursing program” or “online master’s in nursing.” The goal is to come up in the top ten. That first page that comes up.

Tom: That’s called organic search.

Courtney: Yes! Look at you! *(laughter)*

Tom: Look at me!

Kelvin: You get an honorary marketing badge.

Tom: Well, we’ll get to the pay-per-click stuff in a second, but—see if I get this right—in the organic search, you want to be at the top of the non-paid search listings.

Courtney: Correct, because there’s ads usually at the very, very top.

Tom: Right. Which have a little green checkmark thing next to it.

Kelvin: And probably some of our listeners have at least some sense of that. There’s stuff that you can put on the page that you want to surface there in the meta data or into the wording on where it’s placed. That’s the optimization, right?

Courtney: That’s the optimization side of things.

Tom: And that’s constant awareness and rejiggering of your approach because Google’s always mucking around.
Courtney: Updating their algorithms and doing all types of funky stuff to keep us on our toes.

Tom: Okay, so that’s SEO. PPC.

Courtney: Pay-per-click.

Tom: Pay-per-click.

Courtney: Yes. So paid search also is a term. Same thing as PPC. So, those are our paid ads.

Kelvin: So, if I search “online nursing” whatever and then suddenly right at the top is ACME University because somebody paid for that.

Courtney: Yup.

Tom: But if we also did a social media campaign where we were looking for prospects for—I don’t know—a criminal justice bachelor’s program, and we identified everybody within the state of Florida that has an associate’s degree listed in their profile and a criminal justice job, if they clicked on that ad, would that be a pay-per-click also from within Facebook?

Courtney: Yes. So, Facebook, there’s also LinkedIn ads. Same thing. That’s all under the paid search channel.

Tom: Gotcha. CPL.

Kelvin: Oooh.

Courtney: (laughter)

Kelvin: Now you’re just making stuff up, Tom! You’re just pulling letters together. Courtney’s like, “I don’t know what that is!”

Courtney: No, he knows this really well, because it goes back to our budget.

Kelvin: (laughter)

Courtney: Cost per lead. Yes, so, the cost. How much is it costing for that person to come through? So, how much did we pay?

Kelvin: So, it’s actually cost per converted lead.

Courtney: Yes. See?

Tom: And the way Courtney reports it—which makes sense to me—is by program area, and we can get into how we define that, but we don’t have to. Different flavors with different flavors of students using different strategies to reach them are going to naturally cost different amounts.
Courtney: Yes. That’s a good point, and for our listeners, some programs are way more expensive than other programs, and that comes right down to the competition. So, there are a lot of MBAs out there. There are a lot of master’s in nursing out there. All those most likely are going to be a little bit more expensive.

Tom: Social work.

Courtney: Mhmm.

Tom: Alright, and then the last one I wrote down was retargeting. That’s one that I learned a lot about, and so, I’ll tell a funny story I heard from your boss that he was talking to somebody—I think it might have been some muckety muck like a trustee or somebody—who was on a website—

Kelvin: Careful, Tom.

Tom: It’s okay. There’s other stories I will not tell. [Somebody] who was on a website like Wall Street Journal or something and saw a UCF ad and came back to him or his boss and said, “I think it’s great! UCF’s getting your name out there! I saw you advertised on Wall Street Journal! That’s awesome!” and he didn’t have the heart to tell him that it was a retargeted ad. So, could you explain what retargeting is?

Courtney: Yeah. So, simply—and this is actually really controversial right now, especially everything that happened with Facebook recently and sharing of information, so I don’t know how long retargeting will stay with us, but for now, we still have it and it’s highly effective. Basically, if you go on a webpage, it tracks you by your IP address and it will follow you. So, you’ve probably been on Amazon searching for—I don’t know—

Kelvin: Cookbooks!

Courtney: Cookbooks or coffee mugs.

Kelvin: That’s right.

Tom: Yes!

Kelvin: I do that sometimes, actually. Coffee racks.

Courtney: Right, and then all of a sudden, you’ll be on Facebook and you’ll notice that there’s an advertisement for that cookbook or coffee or whatever it is and it’s through Amazon. That is retargeting.

Tom: Yup. So, you end up seeing more ads for stuff that you’ve previously looked at because the internet: it remembers.
Courtney: So, if I’m interested in social work and I’m on the social work page but I’m not quite ready to make a move, we’re going to follow you so that you remember who we are.

Tom: That’s right. So, I’ll go to our website, UCF Online—ucf.edu/online—

Kelvin: Nicely done, Tom.

Tom: So, I will go there on occasion, and I’ll go look at a particular program page—say, I don’t know, social work or nursing or something—and then I’ll be on some news site somewhere and then I’ll see an ad for UCF master’s of social work. Because I did not click—

Courtney: And don’t you click on that ad.

Tom: I know, because we pay for that. I know. I’ve been told.

Courtney: And our UCF family, don’t you click on any of those ads.

Tom: So, because I had gone to the website and because I had gone to a page and viewed it but not filled out the inquiry form and then I’m still surfing around, I’m still being asked, “Hey. Here’s UCF! Check it out!” So, it might take a couple of impressions before you actually make a decision to actually act.

Courtney: He’s on a roll.

Tom: I’m pretty good.

Kelvin: (laughter) If you do so say yourself.

Tom: Alright, so I’m looking at the clock and we’re running down. Man, we have more to talk about. We were going to talk about email marketing and…Well, we did touch on social media a little bit.

Kelvin: One thing that might be a good place to try to wrap up if you don’t mind, because I know you guys have talked about this. You finished your second year here right now, Courtney, but for the year one strategy, I think it maybe is a good application of do you focus on search engine optimization? Do you spend money on pay-per-click? How do you balance that out?

Courtney: My first year here is a blur. (laughter) What did I do? No, in all seriousness, really institutions—especially the ones out there that are looking to do this on their own. So, looking to not partner with a third-party or potentially grow their marketing department, look at what you have within.edu first. That’s your website and everybody’s heard me say this. Your website will always be your highest converting, lowest cost channel. It doesn’t matter the program, doesn’t matter the audience. It’s always going to be your highest converting, lowest cost channel, so that’s a really important one to start with, to focus on. Especially those institutions that have been around for a very, very long time, because you
get SEO points for that. So, really looking at your site, looking at your content that’s in that site, how relevant it is, how easy it is to navigate for students that are looking for certain programs: all of those little pieces are going to help you start converting higher. And again, that doesn’t cost that much to do, whether you maybe hire somebody at first to come in to give you some consulting or you hire somebody within which I highly recommend institutions consider investing in. Search engine optimization is not going anywhere and having a dedicated person that can stay on top of that and continue to optimize it is going to be your best investment.

Tom: So, would you consider that—like if you had to come up with one recommendation for somebody who’s launching an online program marketing initiative would it be focus on your website and SEO?

Courtney: Yes. I’d say focus on your website, your SEO, look at if there’s opportunities to maybe migrate some pages that you have [or] maybe link to certain pages that you have. All of that is going to help increase not only usability but also those SEO points that are important, so that relevant content where you’re going to start ranking on those top pages. Going from that, paid search has always been basically my second because what you’re doing with SEO should complement the paid search, and paid search should complement SEO. The two really work hand in hand together. So, whatever SEO strategy that you decide to partake in, really think about your paid search campaigns and how they’re speaking to each other. So, for example, what keywords are you going after? What keywords are you targeting on your site? What keywords are you targeting on your paid search campaign? That’s going to help you stay in sync and on a line.

Tom: Yeah, and as we’ve grown, we have discovered some competitor institutions using our keywords.

Courtney: Yes.

Kelvin: So, like UCF is somebody else’s keyword?

Courtney: Yes!

Kelvin: Yeah, there you go. Sure.

Tom: “UCF Online” whatever. Who shall rename nameless.

Kelvin: Well, I know our time and our coffee are growing short here and we can talk about more and maybe we’ll have Courtney back and talk about part two and part three of marketing.

Tom: Yeah, there’s more to talk about.

Courtney: I’d love to.
Kelvin:  We’d love to have you. People get tired of listening to us. It’d be nice for a change, but maybe I’ll take a shot at a bottom line, and you guys please correct me or add/refine anything but maybe here’s a place to kind of wrap it up. So, marketing of online programs might not be the first thing you think of as an online education professional, but it is kind of difficult today in our current environment to imagine being a leader in our field without knowing the vocabulary—the lexicon that Tom brought up—and being able to engage productively with marketing professionals either inside the institution or outside the institution. Would you guys agree? Is there anything you’d add to that?

Tom:  Yeah, the only thing I might add is that you can’t undersell the importance of marketing. I think you can build the greatest online highest quality program, but if no students are it, you’re whistling through the graveyard or whatever. Kind of a bad analogy or metaphor I can come up with. If you build it—

Kelvin:  Walking in your scuba suit.

Tom:  *(laughter)* —they may not come. So, you want to make sure you do all you can to make that access available to students and they can’t access it if they don’t know about it.

Kelvin:  Right.

Tom:  Would you agree, Courtney?

Courtney:  I would agree, and the only other thing I would add is really understanding that terminology because those out there that are working with agencies, at the end of the day, you’re not the only institution or only client they have. So, really know these terms, understand what they are so that you can understand where your investment is going and that you’re managing that because no one’s going to care about that more than you. So, just depending on what the circumstance and situation is, it’s important to understand how that works.

Tom:  And maybe one last—

Kelvin:  One last, last one? *(laughter)*

Tom:  Yeah. Sorry. Well, I mean, Courtney made me think of because understanding the terminology I think is critical because then you can understand what it means and how it’s important and why it’s important, but we were talking about cost per lead and things like that. Sometimes those kinds of terms to an academic are not always accepted.

Kelvin:  Yeah, right?

Tom:  Because it sounds too corporate, too industry, and it’s something that Courtney and I have worked on here to translate some of that into terminology that means the same thing but has different labels so that it’s more palatable to certain people in the faculty. Not all faculty, but some faculty object to that sort of corporatizing
of the academic experience, and we’ve turned lead into like prospective student. Things like that. It’s the same thing.

Courtney: Or inquiry.

Tom: Inquiry, yeah. So, that’s something just to keep in mind. Understand your context and your culture and then you can do that translation.

Kelvin: Yeah, that’s all good stuff. So, thank for that, and thank you Courtney for coming in and drinking coffee with us.

Courtney: Thank you for having me!

Kelvin: Happy to have you, and maybe we’ll come up with a time to have you back in here.

Tom: Yeah. Year three anniversary!

Kelvin: Yeah, something like that. Well, until next time, I’m Kelvin.

Tom: I’m Tom.

Kelvin: See ya!