

CRM Case Study

University of Houston – Texas, USA

In their own words: the University of Houston makes the most of good intentions with a new focus on yield





The CRM story of the University of Houston begins with consistently strong applicant and acceptance pools—and missed opportunity during the summer melt. Jeff Fuller, the school’s Director of Recruitment explains:

“We front-end-loaded much of our communication with students at the prospect stage—but then that was it. Admitted students heard no more from us, and were left to choose our school or another. The Houston Chronicle had done a story about our stagnant enrollment and from that, Azorus contacted us proactively to offer help...”

For the University of Houston, the process of courting prospective students was weighted to applicants and admissions—but not to ensuring the highest possible numbers in September.

“We knew we weren’t keeping prospective students engaged in those months between admission and the first day students show up,” says Jeff Fuller, the university’s Director of Recruitment. “We needed to extend our connection with admitted students so that they’d feel more confident about the decision to attend.”

To combat summer melt, the University of Houston implemented a yield management program, a component of CRM. As a result, the yield of admitted students who enrolled increased by 4.4% to 49.6% for 2008-2009, with nearly 700 more transfer students arriving than expected.

With the school’s adoption of CRM methods to increase yield during the summer melt, the admissions team increased enrollment by 3% the following September, with nearly 700 transfer students arriving unexpectedly and enrollment growth of 4.4%.

We know you had some great results the first semester after tackling the summer melt. How did it all begin?

When the Houston Chronicle did a story about our stagnant enrollment, Azorus contacted us to offer help. We talked to them at length about our goals and targets, and they listened, and knew what questions to ask. They’re collaborators, and they’re proactive, and they’re great listeners. From the very beginning, the people at Azorus completely understood our market, our challenges.

If Azorus hadn't come to us with potential solutions to our yield challenges, we might have tried it internally—but as soon as we began working with them, we could see the huge benefits of outsourcing. By taking this on with such a wealth of experience, Azorus would let us focus on strategy. Plus, we knew we didn't have the resources to do it right on our own. Like any other university we're always either busy with a semester in-session, or with classes and administrating. We don't have windows of opportunity to divert our staff from our schedule no matter how much value those efforts would create.

Before they suggested anything specific, the people at Azorus were rock-solid on our needs—to target the top 20% in terms of academics, and to attract more out-of-town students. We brainstormed messaging and delivery, and at every stage they gave us confidence that we were moving forward in the right direction—or that if we needed to, we could adapt or refine our approach.

'Uneventful' isn't one of those appealing words—unless you're describing the adoption of new technology. What was it like to go live with a new CRM-based approach to yield management?

The transition from collaborating and brainstorming to a live, working solution was incredibly smooth. The only delays were the odd times that we were bogged down with other issues and content approvals were delayed—but otherwise, it wasn't just easy but totally unobtrusive and pleasant. The team at Azorus helped us to stay on track with deadlines. Thankfully they're excellent with the friendly reminders, and each person who worked with us was so professional and helpful.

What else do you do to present a more unified front to prospective students?

It's always been important to us to bridge the summer gap with prospective students, and that's why we were so motivated to work with Azorus. For a couple of years now, every admitted student has gotten a phone call from a current student—to say congratulations, to share a little about campus life, and to just say *see you on campus as a cougar!* That gesture reassures both students and parents that a decision for Houston is a good one. It shows them that we value them, that they're special to us. It's this priority that made Azorus such a natural fit for us.



Since the improvements we've measured in yield management, we've also consolidated our efforts along with the other offices that send information out to prospective students, to present a unified front. The orientation, financial aid and academic advising teams plan their drop dates to make sure they meet the national notification deadline in May—and this means we send out a more complete, more cohesive package that answers questions and helps students make their final decision.

The cougar brand is so well-known, so established as a symbol of the UHouston community. How did you feel entrusting it to an outsourced team?

Our brand is one of our most compelling assets, and anything we do in speaking to students has to champion the Cougars—from suspect to prospect to enrolled students. Family and community are huge priorities for us, and our visual brand is the embodiment of that. When we make sure all our materials champion that brand, students are compelled. Azorus created emails and campaigns and content for us as though they were just as invested in the Cougars as we were, and it showed.

We're big believers in testing our approach with focus groups—to get real students and prospects to tell us what resonates best. We always test before and assess afterwards, so we're in a constant state of improvement. Culturally, we put a huge stake in knowing what students like.

From the very start Azorus totally got us. That carried through in all our messaging—they internalized what we're all about and learned really quickly how to best bring that to students. We're launching not just a 4-year relationship with these kids but a lifetime. We think ahead to alumni in that we want students to be engaged on our campus, and not just in class.

Now that you've had time to reflect on that first successful September, how do you feel about the results you saw with improved yield management?

In that first semester, enrollment increased for both freshman and transfer students. It made a lot of folks on campus breathe easier, and our community was impressed as well. The Houston Chronicle followed up their initial coverage with a really favourable article about our growth, which was like coming-full-circle.

The people at Azorus were our partners, not just providers. They understood our goals and helped us to meet them, and at every stage we appreciated that they had done this kind of work so many times before for other universities. Their grasp of our market is extraordinary, and it gave us confidence. When enrollment went up, we knew that Azorus had played a huge role in helping us to increase our yield.

Our mandate at the highest level is to grow, but also to improve our selectivity at the same time. So enrollment increases aren't the only outcome—we want better students, too, and not just more. But having this experience with Azorus last year proved to us that if you communicate more effectively during the summer melt, you gain on both fronts. You put forward a proactive, friendly welcome—especially to the students you want to attract the most—and the outcome is positive by both measures.