

CRM Case Study

Ryerson University – Toronto, Canada

A profile in how a university changed the rules of the game in student recruitment



How a university took on CRM and made its own golden moment

The CRM story of Ryerson University begins with the urgency of overtaxed resources. Susan Vercruysse, Assistant Registrar, Communications and Recruitment for Undergraduate Admissions explains:

“As student expectations about service and access to information were becoming increasingly demanding, we were not able to keep up on their terms. Working with Azorus has helped us to update and streamline our processes and improve our level of service to prospective students and applicants.”

It’s why admissions executives have seasonally-inspired fitful sleeps. In the past decade, Canadian universities have ratcheted up recruitment efforts. Competition is steep, and students are both sought-after and more self-determining and savvy than ever.

Susan Vercruysse, Assistant Registrar, Communications and Recruitment in Undergraduate Admissions at Ryerson University, remembers the beginning of this recruitment renaissance - when personalized updates via email hadn’t reached novelty status, let alone the norm, and when websites weren’t much beyond static contact pages. “Our online presence was functional but not necessarily innovative,” she recalls. “At just about every milestone and touch-point from first point of contact to the start of classes, we were not keeping up when it came to online services and resources. We wanted to leverage the web to work smarter, and of course we also wanted to be more sophisticated in how we came across to prospective students. We wanted to be more than serviceable. We wanted to be memorable.”

Ryerson’s admissions and recruitment team couldn’t have chosen a more serendipitous moment to press the issue of smarter recruitment. The school was energized with a new president, and new resources and directives were being put in place across the board. The website had just been redesigned, new buildings were going up and campus branding was refreshed.

“The momentum was palpable,” she says. “Getting a green light for CRM was easy, especially once we learned how profoundly it would invigorate the way we attract students.”

The urgent mathematics of 25,000 emails

At the time of Ryerson’s foray into CRM-powered recruitment, the team was inundated to the point of drowning with repetitive, low-value tasks. “Our marketing strategy relied heavily on printed materials, which was already becoming a less relevant way to reach students,” she explains. “The information we presented online was limited and often dated. We were inundated with web-based inquiries to the tune of 25,000 emails a year—which our very small team had to answer individually, cutting and pasting from a bank of responses when possible. We didn’t offer online registration for on-campus events or tours, and students were unable to track the status of their application online. We would solicit tens of thousands of requests for printed information, via hard copy cards, during school visits and fairs and then struggle with the resulting data entry and production of mailing labels required to ensure a quick turnaround.”

Like many universities, Ryerson had goals—many of which pointed to automation of one kind or another—but not the means to achieve them all at once. The recruitment team started small, beginning with an in-house system to book and track over 700 annual school visits. Despite being a tactical fix with relatively limited scope, it freed up resources from repetitive, low-value and error-prone tasks—and illustrated the dramatic impact of even a small amount of automation.

“We were eager to make these kinds of changes on a much broader scale,” recalls Vercruysse, “and we knew we would need a partner who would offer more than just the technology pieces. As more universities were targeting Toronto as a lucrative market for prospective students we needed to make an even greater impression.”

In this environment of change and competitive urgency, Vercruysse and the recruitment team sat down to inventory their current challenges and prioritize possible improvements. “We found Azorus and right from the very beginning, everyone from financial and IT leaders to the registrar and business systems strategists wanted to attend the planning meetings and demos,” says Vercruysse. The team first worked with Azorus to develop and launch a new portal for prospective students, releasing it with minimal fanfare as a way to test and refine it in the real world. “We relied on Azorus heavily to get the look and feel right, and to initially populate the portal with content,” she explains. “We made the portal accessible without promoting it, so that people would find out about it and sign up on a small scale. We learned what students appreciated and ironed out the kinks without exposing ourselves too much with a huge user-base—it was a great way to begin.”

Having banked the confidence of that first year, the Ryerson team dedicated a staff resource to own the CRM portal and develop higher-value content for the following season. The next iteration was unveiled with great fanfare at the Ontario Universities' Fair (OUF) in Toronto—an annual event known to attract over 80,000 visitors and generate upwards of 10,000 handwritten request cards over three days.

“Even though a significant chunk of the data gathered at the OUF in the past was incomplete or inaccurate, it took a huge leap of faith to forgo the hard copy request card method in favour of the portal,” she says. “There was good reason for the concern—in that first year at the OUF without the cards, we did see a big reduction in the number of contacts. But since the students inputted their data themselves, the yield from that data was dramatically higher and more lucrative. Now, though we generate fewer contacts, we have far greater accuracy in our data. Plus, with zero request cards we’re able to redeploy staff time and resources. We’re actually performing better—and measuring results more quickly—with lower recruitment costs. It’s a huge vote of confidence that we’re headed in the right direction.”

Beyond the technology of Azorus’ CRM components, Vercruysse credits its people and style with making Ryerson’s CRM journey both fruitful and enjoyable.

“Everyone had an interest in talking about what might be possible, and seeing it all come together.”

The second half of what makes CRM work: Creative freedom

“The people at Azorus are all about the art of the possible—they listen to what you wish for, what restrains you. They’re innovative thinkers, and they helped us to work through obstacles to reach tactical goals and visionary ones. It took work, but they made it as easy as possible for us. They gave us confidence.”

In admissions at Ryerson, as Vercruysse explains, it’s all about generating a robust applicant pool over the course of the fall in order to meet specific program targets.



We have come to rely on our **Choose>Ryerson** portal to help us communicate with prospective students about our programs, services and facilities and encourage them to consider Ryerson as one of their application choices. From timely and relevant e-mails, to dynamic content inside the portal and event registration, we are able to tailor content to an individual student's interests - to help them determine whether Ryerson would be a good fit for them."

Once a prospect decides to make Ryerson one of their application choices, it's our job to inspire them to complete the application process, accept an Offer of Admission and ultimately register for classes in September," she says. "We rely heavily on Azorus to help us keep students engaged throughout the entire cycle."

Every week, and frequently more often, the Ryerson portals are refreshed with personalized updates and news that shows would-be students what awaits them, and to get them excited to be a part of campus life. The school proactively reminds students of admission, application and registration deadlines, faculty updates, and invites them to on-campus events, campus tours and online chats. "We can be so much more creative as to the kind of content we put in front of students thanks to Azorus," says Vercruyssen. "In the beginning, we had no resources to focus on mining the organization for the most relevant content, and put it together in an appealing way. Now, we have dedicated staff time so that once we get prospects' attention enough to sign-up for **Choose>Ryerson**, we are able to give them the kind of insight that keeps them coming back and help them make an informed decision."

"One of the best features that the CRM solution offers us occurs after a student has made the decision to apply to Ryerson. Through our collaboration with Azorus, we are able to offer students self-serve tracking of their application status via their Choose>Ryerson portal based on the Azorus Data Synchronization Module to Oracle PeopleSoft."

The Ryerson admissions team first chose Azorus for its compatibility with their existing system, Oracle PeopleSoft—and what began as a convenient choice in the interest of integration turned into a meeting of minds that made anything possible.

"The people at Azorus totally understand the resource constraints that so many schools face," says Vercruyssen. She describes Azorus as a company that hasn't lost its humanity compared to bigger providers who may value their clients in a less personal way—especially post-deployment, when most are never heard from again without bottomless consulting fees.

The most important part of CRM... the Relationship

CRM is of course about relationships and not just between your institution and students; but also between you and your CRM provider. “We’ve never felt so looked-after by a technology partner,” she says. “We ask ridiculous questions sometimes, and forget how to do things now and then when we’re in a crunch. They’re always cheerful no matter what. What struck us about Azorus was how genuinely they listened to us,” she continues. “They deeply understand the rhythms of our university life. With every conversation, we felt this would be a partnership and not just a purchase. We were right.”

“Most other providers would build the shell of a CRM system and say ‘good luck’, but Azorus knows it’s more about good content than a blank gateway. They bring both creative and technical expertise to the table, in whatever mix makes the most sense for us and our goals. The worth of CRM is obvious to us every single day—thanks to Azorus, we enjoy our work more because it’s high-value. We don’t have to work as hard to generate the same or better results - it’s as straightforward as that.”