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Exclusive Leads in Education: Are they worth the spend?

Shared leads, the leads that generators can sell to more than one brand, are the rulers of lead generation in the Education space. It's a throne well-earned by the reliability of the product. They may not blow the doors off your admission office, but they will drive starts at a reasonably steady rate and cost per acquisition.

Lead generation is a game that requires flexibility and constant optimization, so schools frequently look to test exotic ways to purchase leads. One of the most popular alternatives to test alongside shared leads are exclusive leads, or leads that are only sold to one school. The application of "exclusive leads" in your budget is a matter of trial and error that will be different for an online institution with a geo covering the nation from a "brick and mortar" cosmetology school with two locations in Montana and Utah. Your marketing firm will know how to interpret the results, but you may conclude that exclusive leads prove to be less reliable than you would expect.

Exclusive leads have obvious advantages that are easy to sell, but they come at a price sometimes three or four times the rate of a shared lead. That's just business. If a generator can't sell the lead three times, then they need to make up the money on the one seller. Bottom line: Exclusive costs.

Due to the price point and the reputation of the product, schools often overestimate the advantages and use exclusive leads in a position unfit for their capacity.

The questions you'll want answers to are: Does exclusivity necessarily mean quality? Does the price back out? The answer is not as easy as yes or no. To illustrate, here are some numbers from for a school using shared and exclusive leads with several ground locations, nothing online, but offering a wide variety of trades-based programs. This school bought a total of 9,152 PPL leads in 2015.

Lead Type	Lead Count	Total Cost	Cost Per Enroll
Shared	8339	\$393,969	\$4339
Exclusive	813	\$68,210	\$6201

As you can clearly see, the exclusive leads back out to a cost per enrollment nearly \$2000 higher than the shared. While this at first seems counterintuitive, further examination proves enlightening.



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A lot of schools get scared about leads being shared with two other competitive brands, but in practice that is relatively uncommon. A survey taken with three generators, one with web traffic only, one with call-verified traffic only, and one with a traffic mixture of both, asked them the average amount of *campus-based* schools a shared lead is shopped to across their entire platform. The results are extremely telling:

Call Verified Generator	1.2-1.55
Mixed Traffic Generator	2.2
Web-Only Generator	2

The point to take from this is that many campus-based schools don't have two viable competitors for their shared leads to be shopped to, unless the campus is located in a highly saturated Demographic Marketing Area (DMA), such as Chicago or LA. In several circumstances, you're only dealing with one competitor BUT you're still paying three times the price if purchasing exclusive leads.

The decision to include exclusive leads in your budget should be made with the understanding that your prospective students are going to research more than one school. In fact, a recent poll conducted by Stasney Consulting found that prospective students between the ages of 22 and 45 research three to five options before making a decision to enroll. A shared lead manages that process in a controlled virtual environment monitored by a company advocating for you.

Exclusive leads are good investments in limited circumstances but often do not live up to their advertised super status if used without qualifying reason. If you notice your leads not converting as well at a single one of your campuses, that DMA may have more direct competition with your school and you may want to consider exclusive leads. If you're an online institution with wide geos or generous program offerings, you may want to consider using exclusive leads. Otherwise, feel free to test exclusive leads and see if they work for you, but don't be surprised when shared leads still get you the best ROI.