

# Take it in-house



## APUS/Serengeti Communications Case Study

**Case Background:** American Public University System (APUS) is a leading provider of online post-secondary education focused primarily on serving the military and public service communities. Through two universities, American Military University (AMU) and American Public University (APU), APUS serves over 45,000 students who live and work in all 50 states and more than 100 countries. APUS is committed to expanding access to underserved learners through affordable, high quality, distance learning programs.

**Goal:** In 2004, APUS began working with Serengeti Communications, a digital marketing consulting firm, to create online marketing programs that would meet aggressive student growth goals while keeping marketing costs low. Average industry “cost per acquisition” (the cost to acquire a new student) was high. APUS needed to identify channels and programs that would drive the maximum number of leads (new student inquiries) at the lowest cost per lead possible.

**Solution:** Serengeti Communications conducted an audit to assess the potential of search engines as a marketing channel for APUS. Serengeti determined that the existing APUS Web site was not ideal for natural search engine optimization (the process of manipulating a web site’s content and code in order to achieve high rankings in the “natural,” or unpaid results of a search engine). In addition, the online education market was becoming highly competitive, so achieving results from search engine optimization would not be possible in the short term. “Pay Per Click” search marketing (paying search engines on a per click basis when a user clicks on a paid search listing) offered the fastest way to reach prospective students searching for information about online degree programs.

Other large companies in the online education space were using Pay Per Click aggressively. Serengeti Communications employed a number of tactics to enable APUS to compete effectively in the space, such as purchasing “long tail” keywords (key phrases that consist of several words and are more specific in nature), aggressive bid management tools (constantly adjusting the price paid for keywords to maximize ROI), and testing the effectiveness of ad copy and landing pages (the page at which a searcher arrives after clicking on an ad).

At the end of the first year, Pay Per Click search marketing increased leads and applications by over 100%. Cost per lead and acquisition were lower than that of other marketing channels, so the program was expanded and continued to grow over the next



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two years.

By 2007, the cost of clicks had begun to rise steadily as more universities entered the Pay Per Click space. Serengeti anticipated that maintaining the very low cost per lead would be increasingly difficult. In order to reduce the cost of the program, Serengeti Communications assisted APUS in setting up an in-house Pay Per Click marketing department. Managing the daily requirements of a Pay Per Click program in-house enabled APUS to reduce outsourcing fees and protect the high ROI of the channel.

**Results:** APUS is now in its fifth year of Pay Per Click marketing. Over the five-year period, leads generated from Pay Per Click search marketing have increased by over 1200%. While cost per lead and cost per application have increased as the market became more competitive, Pay Per Click continues to be a top performer for APUS, both in terms of the share of total leads generated and low cost per lead. Beth LaGuardia, Director of Marketing, intends to continue expanding the program: “We are still uncovering incremental efficiencies and new lead sources all the time. Ultimately, Pay Per Click will continue to be a key driver of new students in our market, and we will continue to refine and expand our use of the channel.”



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