



# The Future of Digital Media in Higher Education

a Thruline Marketing eBook



# INTRODUCTION



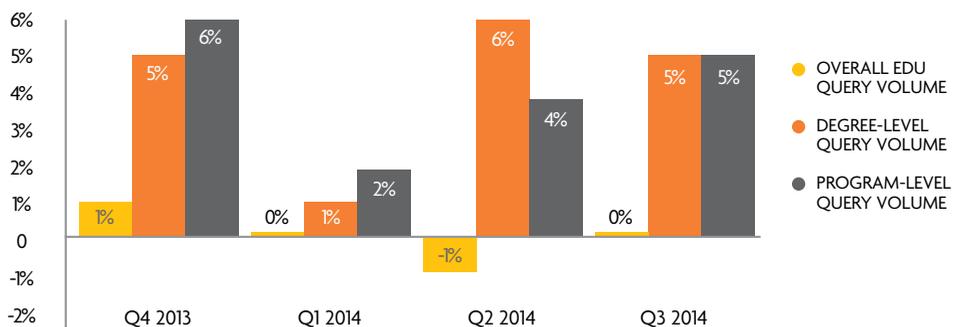
## A DIGITAL PARALLEL FOR THE STATE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

According to an Inside Higher Ed survey, 61 percent of postsecondary institutions are facing a decline in domestic enrollment.<sup>1</sup>

Most higher education professionals know now the predictable year-over-year growth is over, the steal-share environment is the new normal and signs of increased competition abound.

One of those signs is we're at a tipping point in pay-per-click (PPC) marketing. During the last five years, costs-per-click have increased 401 percent.<sup>2</sup> More recently, general education query volume remained flat, paralleling the general demand for higher education.<sup>3</sup>

### HOW HAVE SEARCH QUERY TYPES CHANGED IN THE LAST YEAR?



Source: Google - Education Search Analysis Report. Year-over-year changes Q4 2013 – Q3 2014.

None of this has deterred new competitors from entering the space.

In the coming pages, we will cast a new, encompassing vision for digital media in higher education and explain how the PPC channel can evolve to both remain viable and support an integrated marketing mix.

A person is holding a large, light gray sheet of paper in front of their torso. The paper has a vertical crease down the center and horizontal creases near the top and bottom. The person is wearing a light-colored, button-down shirt and dark blue jeans. The background is a solid, dark gray color.

01

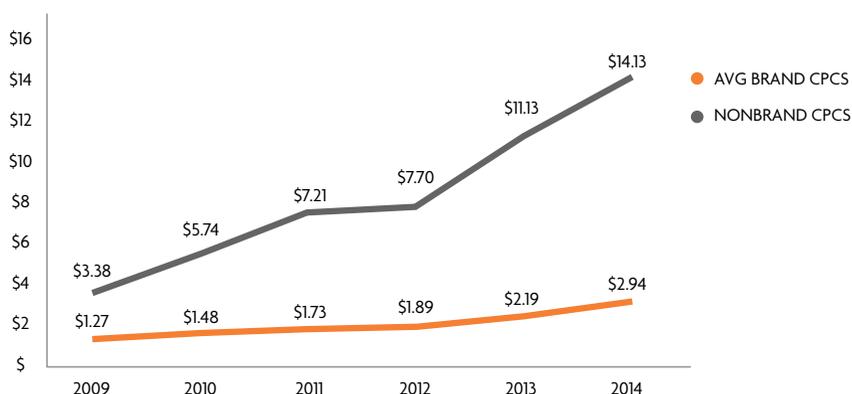
THE CASE FOR BRAND  
BUILDING



the last five years, the nonbrand average cost-per-click increased from \$3.38 to \$14.13. Meanwhile, the average brand cost-per-click increased from \$1.27 to only \$2.94.<sup>4</sup>

The cost of not having a well-known brand is becoming clear. And as we look into the future, it's not hard to imagine paid and organic search results further weighted for relevance to end users. In other words, advertising budget will no longer be the sole guarantor of competitiveness in the digital space.

### HOW HAVE EDUCATION BRAND VS. NONBRAND CPC'S CHANGED?



Source: Thruline proprietary client list. Periods measured: January 2009 – December 2014

The real winners over the long term will be institutions that build brand recognition through top-of-funnel channels like digital display advertising. They will leverage sequential messaging, contextual advertising and look-alike targeting. The result: more unique messaging, intentionality and consistency. As for PPC performance, it will become more dependent on your brand and less dependent on the properties of the channel itself.

If we treat paid search as a mechanism for capturing and channeling consumer intent, we open the conversation up to brand-building originating sources beyond digital media to include offline channels like television and radio. We also emphasize converting our hard-earned traffic at the highest possible rate.

# 02

FINDING INSPIRATION IN  
OTHER VERTICALS





a recent Thruline white paper, “Higher Education’s Business Pivot,” the retail sector became a parallel for the future of higher education for a few reasons. First, this parallel captured a dramatic change in prospective students who now view themselves as customers. Second, it explained the sum total of online and offline experiences that shape perception as more important than the measurement of a single channel. Third, it embraced the influential power of post-purchase activity and word-of-mouth recommendations. Finally, it showed brands that try to be everything to everyone face significant challenges.

How can we specifically apply the lessons of retail to the future of digital in higher education?

#### UNDERSTAND COMMERCE IS ABOUT CONVENIENCE

Offer potential consumers what they want, when and where they want it, based on device and consumer intent. To minimize the risk of inquiry abandonment, request the least amount of personal information necessary in the initial engagement.

BRANDS THAT TRY TO BE  
EVERYTHING TO EVERYONE FACE  
SIGNIFICANT CHALLENGES.

Use everyday language in developing your content, and design common pathways for helping the anonymous visitors of your site find the information they need. A chat-now option is valuable, but is not a replacement for a thought-out interactive experience in which visitors can help themselves.

## TURN EVERY INTERACTION INTO AN OPPORTUNITY

Question everything. Many schools have written student testimonials. Few have video testimonials, despite the clear increase in video consumption. Even fewer have temporarily entrusted current students to manage a behind-the-scenes Twitter account and answer prospective student questions. It's one thing to talk about your institution's values. It's another to create a social media conversation for chronicling how these values are lived through student stories.





## BUILD TRUST WITH TRANSPARENCY

Social media, ranking sites and review apps will reveal any disconnect between your messaging and students' perceived reality. Your brand needs to provide staff both the ability to respond in near realtime and the direction as to how they should respond. Visibility into your staff resolving an issue with genuine empathy is more valuable than a crafted boilerplate response.

# 03

THE EXPANDING WORLD  
OF DIGITAL





2014, an estimated 1.75 billion people worldwide used a smartphone. That number is projected to maintain double-digit growth through 2016.<sup>5</sup> In the education sector, 47 percent of prospective students will use a mobile device in their research process, according to Google.<sup>6</sup> 27% of consumers will abandon a site if it is not mobile-optimized.<sup>7</sup>

A digital strategy without mobile at its core is less effective at best, outdated at worst. Are your current website and interactive assets mobile-friendly? When it comes time to revamp them, design for mobile first (paying special attention to load times), and build outward to the desktop experience.

In the paid search realm, mobile costs-per-click are slightly cheaper, yet still slightly less likely to convert. However, the incremental percentages make a big difference in a steal-share environment. These numbers are also indicative of current prospective student intent, and they are likely to improve as smartphone adoption increases. Indeed, 80 percent of mobile Internet users say they prefer ads that are relevant to them locally.<sup>8</sup>

## COMPARING CONVERSION RATES

YEAR	DESKTOP	MOBILE
2009	7.62%	6.43%
2010	7.46%	6.10%
2011	6.87%	5.84%
2012	6.13%	4.67%
2013	4.86%	3.47%
2014	5.13%	3.59%

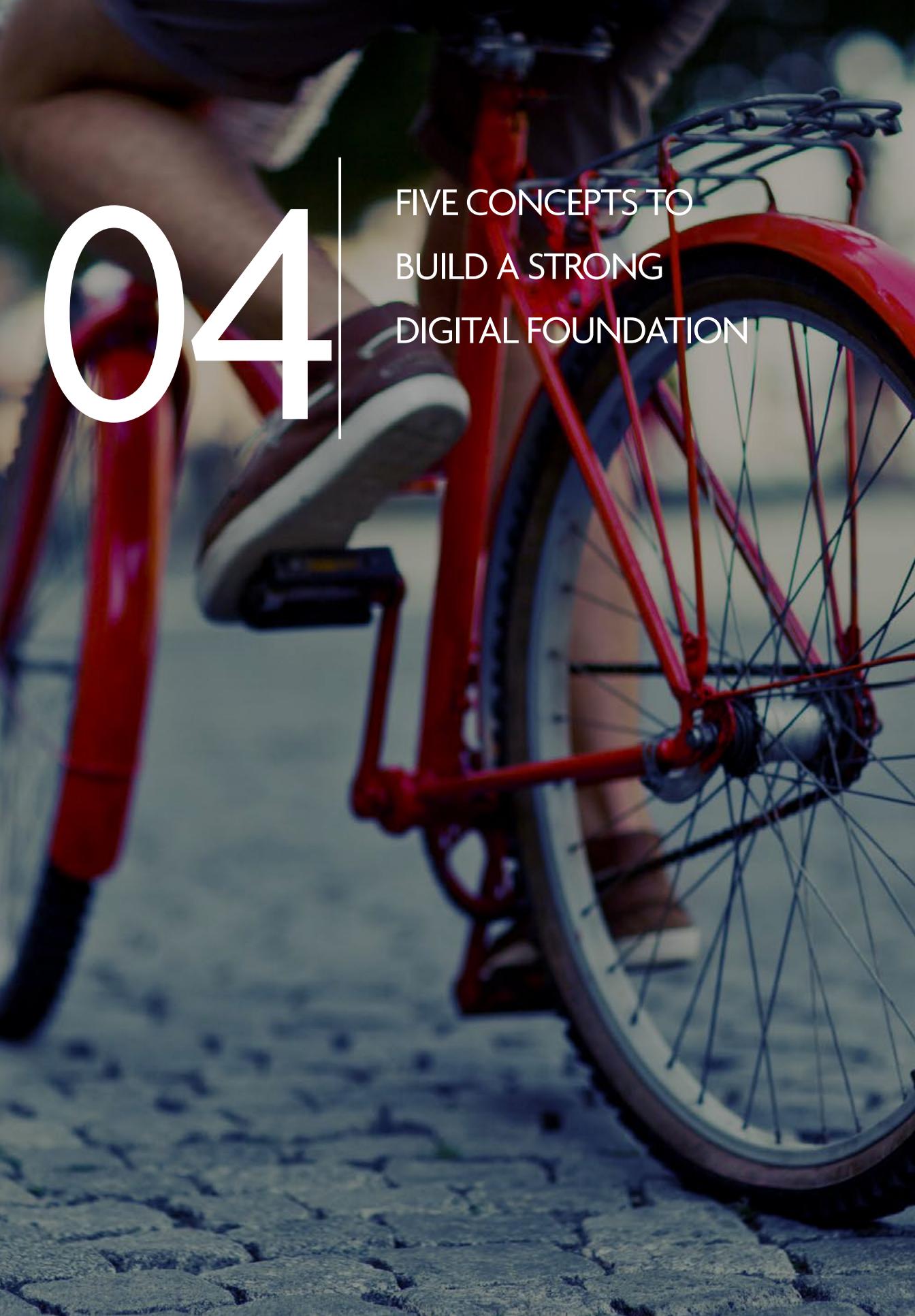
## COMPARING COSTS

YEAR	DESKTOP	MOBILE
2009	\$4.50	\$2.76
2010	\$5.34	\$3.04
2011	\$7.16	\$4.50
2012	\$7.73	\$4.94
2013	\$12.09	\$8.60
2014	\$14.48	\$11.46

Source: Thruline proprietary client list. Periods measured: January 2009 – December 2014

# 04

FIVE CONCEPTS TO  
BUILD A STRONG  
DIGITAL FOUNDATION





rawing from our lessons learned working with institutions of all types and sizes, there are five things you can do today to increase your competitiveness in digital media.

#### KEEP THE OVERALL GOAL IN MIND

The goal for digital education marketers will likely remain the same: Predictably and sustainably increase enrollment.

What has changed is our ability to track the impacts of brand-building channels on inquiries “downstream,” instead of solely relying on directly attributable inquiries. In other words, there’s now more than one variable in the equation, requiring flexibility among channel-specific initiatives to achieve the overall goal.

Always be testing your marketing mix to know when conditions change.

#### TRACK CROSS-CHANNEL IMPACTS

Campaigns integrating common messaging and relational measurement across four or more channels will outperform single- or dual-channel campaigns by 300 percent.<sup>9</sup> Yet only 4 percent of CMOs feel well prepared to execute cross-channel marketing campaigns based on their technology stack capabilities.<sup>10</sup>

Part of the challenge stems from failing to create or define baselines, triggers and flags for measurement.

For example, are you uploading traditional media schedules and using them to analyze digital impact? Are social media posts timed to the traditional campaign as well? Are you tagging PPC bids with programmatic terms to aid in ongoing and historical analysis?

Evaluate all of your activities, and view the performance of one channel through the filter of another.

## BECOME LOCATION-AWARE

We know proximity to an institution is a primary driver of enrollment for both undergraduates and graduates, online and ground. Though this represents only a portion of overall enrollment, it is more cost-effective for institutions to own their surrounding search traffic through geo-specific terms and geo-modified bidding and extend outward than it is to achieve broad market dominance and turn inward.

## EXPAND KEYWORD FOOTPRINT

Google has become so adept at understanding search intent, it has changed the syntax of search queries. “Online business degree” has become “What online MBA is closest to me.”

A more robust search syntax has increased relevance to end users, allowed advertisers to bid on less broad terms and more targeted keyword phrases, and empowered content producers to write content for actual users - not search engine spiders.

As you build your digital strategy, think like end users and spend more time crafting highly relevant keyword phrases that will complement your competitive broad terms.

## DRIVE BRAND AWARENESS

Ninety percent of education seekers start their search without a particular school in mind.<sup>11</sup> Schools that appear first will have a distinct competitive advantage.

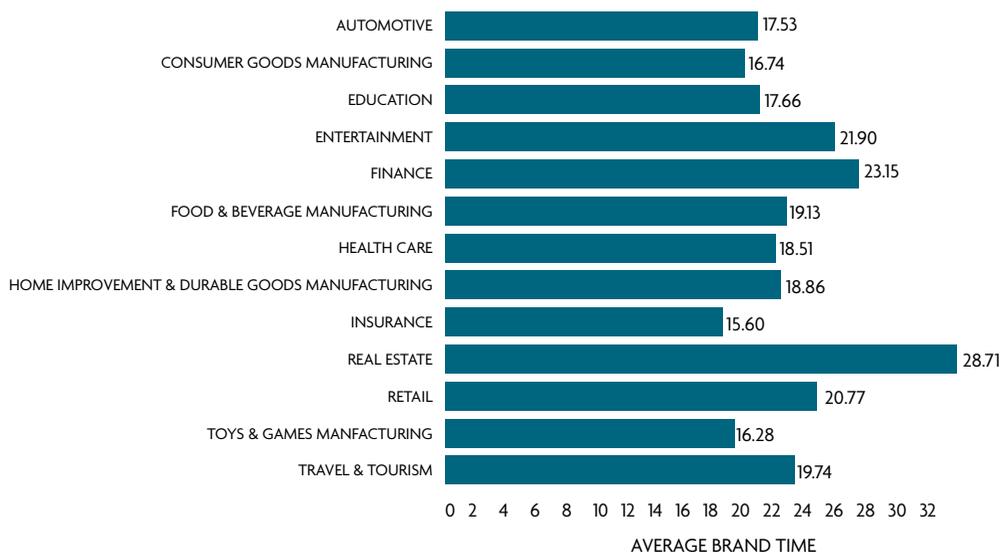
What makes digital display different than TV for brand building? In a word: targeting. Consider your intended TV audience for any particular show. Television advertisements are primarily built on the concept that viewers will watch the commercial intently and not listen to it in the background or fast-forward through it with their DVR. We know this intent often doesn't match reality.

Digital display advertisements allow you to deliver the same brand-oriented message to the target demographic of a particular show via ads and advanced targeting capabilities that include age, gender, location and more. In other words, you can get your message in front of the right people and develop deeper insights as to whether they saw the ad, closed it, or followed the call to action and engaged.

Does TV still have a place in the marketing mix? Absolutely. TV still remains the most influential medium<sup>12</sup> and can be even more effective when paired with digital display. Marketers can extend the reach of TV by delivering it in tandem with display or search ads. When users see a television ad and then turn to their tablet or phone to conduct research, they should see similar branding and complementary messaging across all channels. This presence builds recognition and trust.

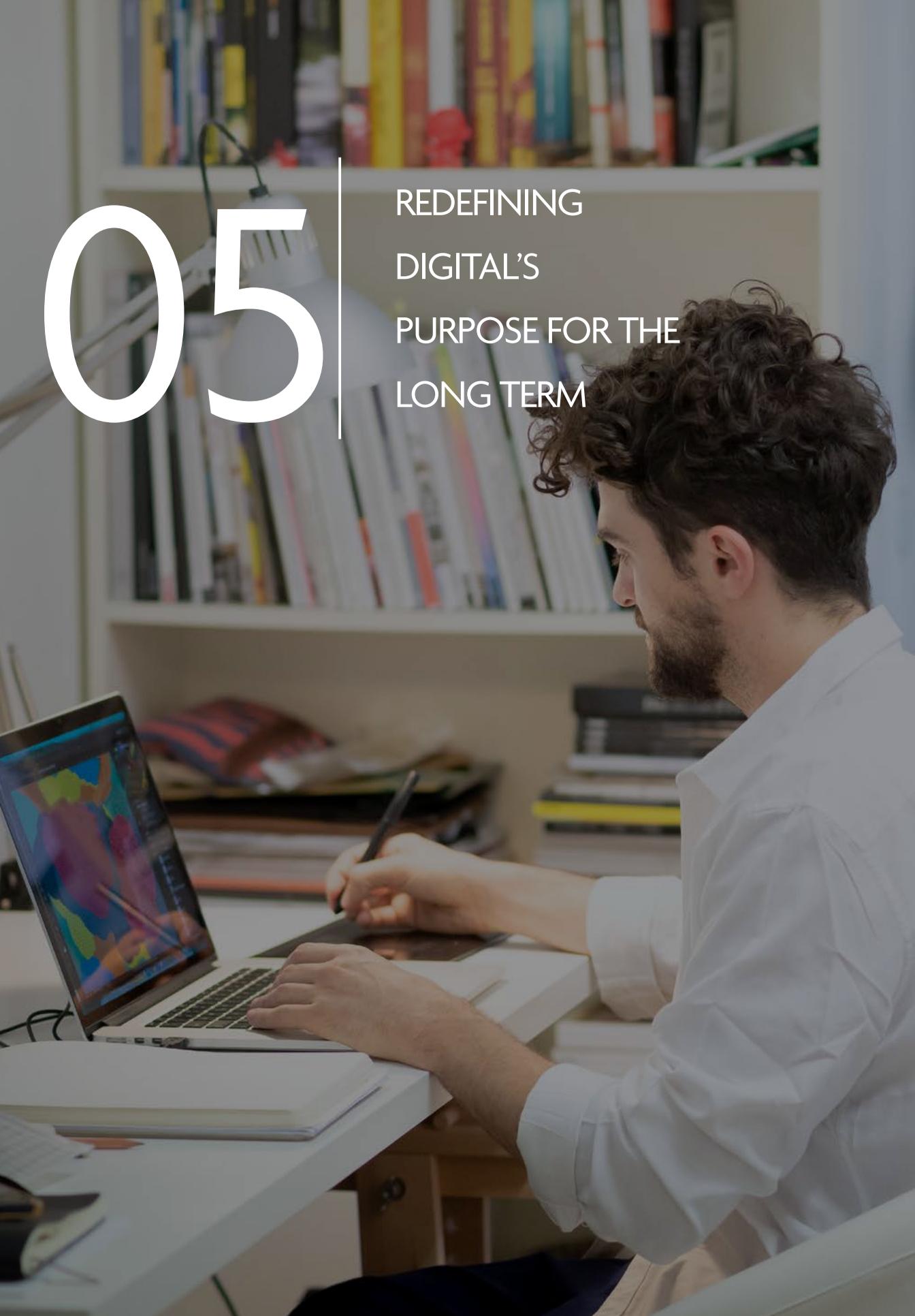
The power of video translates to the display medium as well. When video content is used in display advertising for education, for example, viewers spend an average of 17.6 seconds with branded content.<sup>13</sup> The education vertical also has a higher click-through rate (CTR) than retail, health care and insurance for these kinds of rich media ads.

## RICH MEDIA AVERAGE BRAND TIME BY CAMPAIGN VERTICAL



# 05

REDEFINING  
DIGITAL'S  
PURPOSE FOR THE  
LONG TERM





future of digital media in higher education will be about paring down mass advertising and focusing on one-on-one conversations. Advances in software capabilities will enable us to leverage demographic, location, interest, social and intent data to build custom audience profiles by segment and deliver tailored messages at the individual level.

Imagine if we know that, of the individuals interested in criminal justice programs, 85 percent are males who are also interested in sports. As much as the school brand allows, ad copy can be modified to relate sports to criminal justice. More specifically, a large, national online university could use geographically relevant content and sports-related language to establish local recognition with a male audience.

But that's just scratching the surface of what digital can do.

What if PPC led to a website visit, which triggered relevant social advertising, which led to a website conversion, then a personalized nurturing campaign and finally social media engagement?

This scenario isn't science fiction; it's actually possible leveraging technology available to tech-savvy marketers, and consumers will respond. In one survey, 72 percent of consumers – not marketing professionals – indicated they want an integrated marketing approach that provides value.<sup>14</sup>

Prospective students want relevant, engaging content, and as marketers, we're better positioned than ever to deliver it.

# 06

PARTING THOUGHTS





Modern marketers have an impressive toolkit at their disposal. We need to remove our channel-specific blinders to see technology is not only affecting consumer behavior, it's changing our ability to execute integrated and highly relevant campaigns across search, display, email and social – all ingredients

of a sound digital strategy.

Yes, pay-per-click marketing is reaching a tipping point, but only when we approach it as an individual channel instead of a mechanism for capturing and directing consumer intent.

This approach should build the case for stronger brands that are able to take a step back from frequent changes in consumer behavior, focus on the messaging and employ each channel to its fullest potential.



# RESOURCES

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