




Student Search

Choosing a Search Vendor: What to Ask and Why

A complete list of questions you should ask every potential Search provider – and *why* you should ask them!

Fire Engine  RED



The Questions and OUR Answers.

For the questions ONLY — without our answers — go to page 15.

Experience.

■ When did your company start offering Search services?

Why it matters: Quite simply, it's hard to do Search well! It takes years of experience to understand what works (and what doesn't).

Our answer: We've been providing Search services since 2007, so we know what works, and we have the results to prove it.

ROI.

■ What results did you get for clients in the last Search cycle?

Why it matters: Search vendors should be able to show you results they've achieved for schools similar to yours, and from there, give you an idea of what results YOU can expect.

Our answer: With regard to Senior Search, our clients achieved an ROI of 14.5% (on average) in Net Revenue (including discount rate), in the 2015-2016 Search cycle. That is, for every dollar they invested in Search, our clients received \$14.50 in Net Revenue.

With regard to Junior & Sophomore Search, we helped our clients increase their inquiries by 22% (on average) year-over-year. Note: Fire Engine RED defines an "inquiry" as a student who submitted a web form or returned a business reply form.

Clients.

■ How many Search clients do you have?

Why it matters: You want to work with a Search vendor that's big enough to have had success with a variety of schools ... and small enough to develop a custom strategy to help you achieve your school's specific goals.

Our answer: Approximately 60. Each year, we partner with a select number of schools, which allows us to customize every aspect of our clients' projects. At Fire Engine RED, we treat no two Search projects the same!

Ownership Structure.

■ What is the ownership structure of your company? Is it privately held, public, or backed by private equity?

Why it matters: Your Search vendor should put YOUR school first and foremost, not the financial interests of their investors. This can be challenging for public companies and companies backed by private equity. Here's why:

Public companies are typically judged on quarterly earnings; similarly, companies backed by private equity firms generally have an investment horizon of three to five years. In both cases, these types of companies are focused on short-term gains rather than on the long-term success of their clients.

Our answer: As a privately owned company, we believe that when we do right by our clients, our own success will follow. We fully intend to remain privately owned for many years to come; this will enable us to continue to focus on what's best for the schools we serve – today AND in the future.

Strategy.

■ Who will we work with on the strategic aspects of our project?

Why it matters: Search is all about strategy. To do Search right, you need to work directly with a team of strategists who have deep expertise in the many strategic aspects of your project.

Our answer: You'll consult and collaborate directly with Fire Engine RED's team of senior strategists at every stage of your Search project (from planning through execution to completion).

Our team of strategists consists of these experienced professionals:

Mike Matthews

Executive Vice President of Search Services.

[LinkedIn profile](#)

Jeff McLaughlin

Executive Vice President of Enrollment Data, Strategy & Analytics

[LinkedIn profile](#)

Bill Preble (Ed.D.)

Vice President for Enrollment Strategies & Solutions

[LinkedIn profile](#)

Mandy Nagel

Creative Director

[LinkedIn profile](#)**Alexa Poulin**

Executive Vice President of Marketing & Digital Operations for our digital partner, Carnegie Communications

[LinkedIn profile](#)

Predictive Modeling.

■ Does your company offer Predictive Modeling services?

Why it matters: Predictive Modeling can help you be more strategic in your list purchasing and outreach, and help you get the most out of your Search investment.

Our answer: Yes. We offer Predictive Modeling services, and we're using our models to get great results for our clients.

■ Are your models customized?

Why it matters: You want to work with a Search vendor who can create custom models based on your needs ... and who won't limit you to a single model if multiple models are necessary.

Our answer: Yes. We can create a custom model (or models) for you. In addition to predicting outcomes, our model(s) can help you identify more students from the populations you desire (such as low-income, high-achieving students; academically talented first-generation students; females interested in science and math).

■ What data sources do you use to build your models?

Why it matters: Your Search vendor should have access to the most educationally relevant, and predictive, data sources.

Our answer: We have EXCLUSIVE access to the College Board's Segment Analysis Service, which includes 150+ educationally relevant variables for each student. With Segment Analysis Service, we're able to reach beyond the usual commercial data and ZIP code trends to make our models more informative and predictive. Without this data, you're potentially missing out on students who'd be a great fit for your school.

In addition to Segment Analysis Service, we also tap into:

- Our clients' historical data.
- Our proprietary Search performance data, collected and analyzed over the course of a decade.
- Various other commercially available sources.

■ Can your models, and the data sources on which they're built, be applied to ALL list sources?

Why it matters: The “best” students for your school may appear on lists from different sources. Some models, and their data sources, can't be applied across all list sources, which lowers your return on investment with regard to list purchasing and outreach.

Our answer: Yes. Our models (built on Segment Analysis Service) can be applied across ALL list sources (ACT, College Board, NRCCUA, etc.) ... or even to your inquiry pool.

List Purchasing.

■ What is your approach to list purchase strategy?

Why it matters: Most Search vendors build a list purchase strategy for their clients based on previous list orders and a surface-level look at recent entering classes, rather than taking a deep dive into historical data.

Our answer: At Fire Engine RED, we take a deep dive into our clients' historical enrollment data, including multiple years of inquiries, applicants, admits, enrolls, even students who persist. In addition, we'll analyze and leverage historical records to determine which students are most likely to engage, inquire, apply, and/or enroll at your school (or to identify pockets of students who will be most influenced by a targeted communications outreach).

We'll then develop personas, using specific student characteristics (such as academic profile, demographic, geographic, or socioeconomic status) and create a list strategy, segmentation, communications flow, and more.

■ Do you offer year-round Search services?

Why it matters: New student names become available all the time. So, your Search vendor needs to be able to react quickly and take advantage of whatever opportunities arise, at any time during the year. Also, as more sources of names become available – and as names become available more often – the ability to do year-round Search becomes even more important.

Our answer: Yes. We can launch a new Search campaign anytime fresh names become available. Year-round Search is a great way to help you diversify your class and reach new markets.

■ Will we be able to access (and download) our raw list files?

Why it matters: You should be able to access your raw files and download them anytime you wish. This way, you'll be able to supplement your Search outreach with additional marketing efforts (such as sending an open house invitation to students who have not interacted with your Search campaign).

Our answer: Yes. You'll be able to access (and download) your raw list files any time.

New Inquiries.

■ Can we add the names of new inquiries to our Senior Search campaign on a weekly basis?

Why it matters: With new names hitting your pipeline at all times, your vendor should be flexible enough to add them to your electronic campaign, at any interval of your choosing.

Our answer: Yes. We can add the names of your new inquiries to the electronic portion of your Senior Search campaign on a weekly basis, or at any time you wish ... at no extra cost.

Project Management.

■ Do your project managers have admissions experience?

Why it matters: Your project manager needs to have worked in the admissions field to truly understand admissions and the complexity of the Student Search process.

Our answer: Yes. All of our project managers have worked in admissions, so they understand the admissions process and the challenges you face.

Creative.

■ Do you outsource your campaign creative?

Why it matters: When a Search vendor outsources their creative work, the copywriters and designers they outsource it to aren't necessarily experts in Search, and what works in different industries doesn't necessarily work for Search.

In addition, when creative is outsourced, it's unlikely you'll have direct access to the people actually doing the creative work. (It's worth noting that, even when a Search vendor has an in-house team, you don't usually get access to the creative team; communication is funneled through the project manager.)

Our answer: We do NOT outsource creative! At Fire Engine RED, we have a complete in-house creative team of designers, copywriters, quality assurance specialists, and more ... all of whom are experts in delivering winning Search creative. In addition, you'll collaborate directly with the creative experts assigned to your project; we believe this approach leads to the best results.

■ If you do creative in-house, who leads your creative team?

Why it matters: Your Search vendor should have a creative director leading its creative team. Having a highly experienced leader serves as an indicator of how committed the vendor is to providing top-level creative.

Our answer: Our creative team is headed by our creative director Mandy Nagel, who's an Apple Inc. alumna.

■ Do you use Responsive Design to create your clients' Search campaigns?

Why it matters: Today, approximately 65% of the students who view our clients' Search campaigns do so on a mobile device. Responsive Design enables the electronic components of your Search campaign to adapt dynamically to any screen size.

Our answer: Yes, and to the best of our knowledge, we're the ONLY Search provider that uses Responsive Design to create every aspect of our clients' campaigns. This ensures email messages, web forms, and landing pages look good and work well on any device.

Other vendors may say their materials have been optimized for mobile, but keep in mind, that's not the same (and not as effective) as producing responsively designed pieces. For example, "mobile-optimized" email messages and forms often use font sizes that are too small to read, and include images that are the wrong sizes.

Electronic Campaign.

■ Approximately how many email messages do you recommend we send to students?

Why it matters: The number of messages sent to students by Search vendors can vary widely from vendor to vendor, from as few as three to more than 60! Your vendor should provide you with clear strategic reasons for the number of messages they send.

Our answer: We recommend sending a series of 12 messages to Seniors, and nine (9) messages to Juniors and Sophomores. Our data shows, in most cases, that sending fewer than nine (9) messages lowers the impact of a campaign, while sending more than 12 messages results in diminishing returns.

■ How will we know when our messages and mailings have been sent?

Why it matters: Many Search vendors won't send you a copy of your campaign at the same time it's sent to students, even though it's important to "experience" your campaign the same way students do.

Our answer: Here's how you'll know when your campaign was sent ...

- Your project manager will send you an email message as soon as your campaign launches.
- You'll receive copies of your electronic messages and print materials at the same time students get them.

■ How many different HTML templates will you create for us?

Why it matters: Many Search vendors create only a single HTML template and use the same header, layout, visuals, etc., for every message. All that changes is the copy! This can result in students ignoring your messages as your campaign goes on.

Our answer: We'll create a unique template for each message – a total of 12 for Seniors, and nine (9) for Juniors and Sophomores.

■ Can you develop targeted messaging for different student populations?

Why it matters: Your campaigns won't be as effective if you use "one-size-fits-all" messaging and copy.

Our answer: Yes. We'll develop targeted messaging for different student populations, based on academic major, gender, geography and more.

■ Do you offer pre-populated web forms?

Why it matters: The better the student experience, the more likely the student will be to complete your web form, whether it's on a computer or a mobile device.

Our answer: Yes, and to the best of our knowledge, Fire Engine RED is the ONLY Search provider that exclusively offers pre-populated, responsively designed forms. We create forms to dynamically adapt to all screen sizes – desktop, tablet, or smartphone – making them easier to view and complete.

■ Can we use conditional logic in our web forms?

Why it matters: Students are more likely to complete a web form if they're not required to view questions that don't apply to them.

Our answer: Yes. We can use conditional logic to streamline the web form experience.

Application.

■ Can you create a pre-populated Senior Search application for us?

Why it matters: Not all Search vendors are able to create a customized, pre-populated application. This can be a problem if you don't wish to drive students to your current application(s).

Our answer: Yes. We can create a new, customized, pre-populated application for you, using Responsive Design. This means the application will dynamically adapt to all screen sizes – desktop, tablet, or smartphone – making it easier to view and complete.

■ How quickly will students receive a confirmation message that their Senior Search application has been received?

Why it matters: With some vendors, it can take up to 24 hours to send confirmation email messages, which can result in students/parents contacting your office to ask if their applications were received.

Our answer: Confirmation messages will be sent to students immediately, so they'll know in seconds if their applications have been received.

Print Campaign.

■ Can you create a customized print piece for us?

Why it matters: Print still matters – especially to parents.

Our answer: Yes. We can create a modern, custom-designed, eye-catching print piece that reflects your brand. Our most popular print option for Junior and Sophomore Search is a self-mailer with business reply form; for Senior Search, it's a self-mailer.

Fulfillment.

■ Can you process our business reply forms?

Why it matters: If you don't want your office inundated with incoming business reply forms, you'll need to find out if your Search vendor is equipped to process them.

Our answer: Yes. We can set up a special post office box so your business reply forms can be returned to us. As we receive your reply forms, we'll capture the data and make it available to you in real-time through a web interface. You'll be able to download this data anytime you wish.

■ Will our fulfillment pieces focus on our school specifically, or the admissions process in general?

Why it matters: If customization is important to you, find out if the vendor's fulfillment pieces will focus specifically on what's unique about your school, or if they'll be generic pieces with standard content about the admissions process (for example, how to get the most out of a campus visit, or what to expect in an interview).

Our answer: We'll create a customized fulfillment piece for you; it will focus on your school specifically, not on the admissions process in general. Our most popular fulfillment options include a mini-brochure, mini-poster, postcard or postcard series, self-mailer, and tri-fold brochure.

■ How often will our fulfillment pieces be sent, and how will we know they've been sent?

Why it matters: The best way to keep students engaged is to respond to them promptly. Some Search vendors can take a month (or longer) to send fulfillment pieces to students. In addition, most vendors don't have any way for you to track the dates fulfillment pieces are sent.

Our answer: During the first two months of your campaign, your fulfillment piece(s) will be sent to students on a weekly basis. For the next two months, your fulfillment piece(s) will be sent out on a twice-monthly basis. After that, we'll have two additional mail drops.

Best of all, each time we send a fulfillment piece, we'll post the send date to your web interface, so you'll be able to view and/or download this information anytime.

Real-time Data, Custom Export, and Reports.

■ Will we have access to our campaign data in real-time?

Why it matters: A Search vendor needs to provide you with ongoing access to your results, so you can track your campaign's progress, and have the opportunity to make any necessary adjustments to the campaign.

Our answer: Yes. All of your data is available to you in real-time, 24/7/365, including application submissions, web form submissions, business reply form submissions, email opens, and click-thrus.

■ Can you create a custom export format for us?

Why it matters: You want to be able to easily move your campaign data into your CRM or other admissions system.

Our answer: Yes. We can create a custom export for you that makes it easy to import your campaign data into your CRM or other admissions system.

■ What types of reports do you provide and when do you provide them?

Why it matters: Most Search vendors only provide a single report at the end of a Search campaign. As a result, you don't get the opportunity to track your campaign's progress or make any necessary adjustments while the campaign is ongoing. Not having this information also makes it difficult to follow up with students on a timely basis.

In addition, your vendor should provide an ROI report at the end of each Senior Search project, so you can see the return on your Search investment.

Our answer: We'll provide you with custom engagement reports – twice a month – so you can see the degree to which each student interacted with your campaign.

Your engagement reports will cover a variety of information, including:

- Year-over-year comparison.
- Engagement level by list source.
- Engagement level by segmentation category, such as gender, region, ethnicity, etc.
- Email campaign statistics, such as opens, click-thrus, mobile usage, etc.

In addition, you'll receive an ROI report at the conclusion of your Senior Search project.

Value-added Campaigns.

■ Can you create a special campaign for parents?

Why it matters: Many parents are highly influential and highly engaged in the college selection process.

Our answer: Yes. We can send personalized email messages (and/or a print campaign) to the parents of your Search responders. We've seen the engagement level on our parent campaigns reach as high as 72%!

■ Can you create a separate communications flow for students who respond to our Junior and Sophomore campaigns?

Why it matters: Your responders are your most highly engaged prospects, so it's crucial that you continue to communicate with them frequently after they've inquired.

Our answer: Yes. We can create a special communications flow (that will run for several weeks) for students who submit your web form or return a business reply form. Our responder campaigns are delivering fantastic value, with engagement levels as high as 75%!

■ Can you create a yield campaign for our accepted students?

Why it matters: A yield campaign can help you make the case to accepted students as to why they should accept your admissions offer.

Our answer: Yes. We can create a yield campaign for accepted students.

■ Can you create a campaign that drives our accepted students to a pre-populated enrollment deposit form?

Why it matters: You want to make it easy for accepted students to deposit.

Our answer: Yes. We can create a pre-populated enrollment deposit form for you, which will enable students to deposit online using the payment method of their choice.

Digital Services.

■ Which digital strategies (if any) do you offer to bolster your Search efforts?

Why it matters: Digital marketing is a great way to boost Search results. Many Search vendors offer one or two digital methods, but ideally, you want to work with a company that offers a variety of services. For example, if you're looking to tap into a particular high school, Geofencing may be the most appropriate tool.

Our answer: We've partnered with Carnegie Communications, the digital marketing leader in the higher education market, to offer a wide variety of digital strategies, including IP Targeting, Retargeting, Social Media Targeting, and Geofencing.

■ What is your list size for IP Targeting?

Why it matters: Most vendors require a minimum of 10,000 names per list, which can be a barrier to entry if you don't have lists that large, or the budget to support that reach.

Our answer: Our minimum list size is 3,000 names. This gives you the ability to reach smaller segments that are important to you, such as a small list of your best prospects or your accepted student list. It's also a great way to test a campaign before going all in on it.

■ What is your match rate for IP Targeting?

Why it matters: Most vendors only have a match rate of 40-50%, which means up to 50% of the audience you're messaging will be left behind and won't receive your digital ads.

Our answer: Our match rate is 90-95%. With such a high match rate, you can be sure your important calls to action – such as open house registration, application deadlines, and requests for information – are being delivered to nearly your entire list.

Ready to learn more? Want to see some creative samples?
Interested in Predictive Modeling?

Let's Talk →

SCROLL down to get the Search Vendor Questions ONLY (without our answers).



Questions Only.

Experience.

- When did your company start offering Search services?

ROI.

- What results did you get for clients in the last Search cycle?

Clients.

- How many Search clients do you have?

Ownership Structure.

- What is the ownership structure of your company? Is it privately held, public, or backed by private equity?

Strategy.

- Who will we work with on the strategic aspects of our project?

Predictive Modeling.

- Does your company offer Predictive Modeling services?
- Are your models customized?
- What data sources do you use to build your models?
- Can your models, and the data sources on which they're built, be applied to ALL list sources?

List Purchasing.

- What is your approach to list purchase strategy?
- Do you offer year-round Search services?
- Will we be able to access (and download) our raw list files?

New Inquiries.

- Can we add the names of new inquiries to our Senior Search campaign on a weekly basis?

Project Management.

- Do your project managers have admissions experience?

Creative.

- Do you outsource your campaign creative?
- If you do creative in-house, who leads your creative team?
- Do you use Responsive Design to create your clients' Search campaigns?

Electronic Campaign.

- Approximately how many email messages do you recommend we send to students?
- How will we know when our messages and mailings have been sent?
- How many different HTML templates will you create for us?
- Can you develop targeted messaging for different student populations?
- Do you offer pre-populated web forms?
- Can we use conditional logic in our web forms?

Application.

- Can you create a pre-populated Senior Search application for us?
- How quickly will students receive a confirmation message that their Senior Search application has been received?

Print Campaign.

- Can you create a customized print piece for us?

Fulfillment.

- Can you process our business reply forms?
- Will our fulfillment pieces focus on our school specifically, or the admissions process in general?
- How often will our fulfillment pieces be sent, and how will we know they've been sent?

Real-time Data, Custom Export, and Reports.

- Will we have access to our campaign data in real-time?
- Can you create a custom export format for us?
- What types of reports do you provide and when do you provide them?

Value-added Campaigns.

- Can you create a special campaign for parents?
- Can you create a separate communications flow for students who respond to our Junior and Sophomore campaigns?
- Can you create a yield campaign for our accepted students?
- Can you create a campaign that drives our accepted students to a pre-populated enrollment deposit form?

Digital Services.

- Which digital strategies (if any) do you offer to bolster your Search efforts?
- What is your list size for IP Targeting?
- What is your match rate for IP Targeting?