Calls-to-Action Primer

You have likely spent a considerable amount of time developing high quality content for your website with the goal of encouraging prospects to browse the site and, if they aren't ready to commit on the first visit, ensuring they feel comfortable returning. Developing your website to this extent is only the first step. The majority of your prospects will not be ready to purchase on their first visit, and, as a result, the ultimate goal of your communications material should not be to bring them back, but also to encourage them to take a concerted step that will move them closer to purchasing. These smaller actions, called micro-actions in the marketing industry, walk prospects through the funnel and towards the ultimate action (or macro-action) of application or enrollment. Many organizations miss these opportunities to shepherd prospects through the funnel because they use only the most obvious, biggest calls to action (e.g., "apply now" or "enroll today") or, if they do use micro-actions, they bury them and render them ineffective.

This tool will walk provide a taxonomy of calls-to-action as well as a primer on developing a calls-to-action strategy.

Varieties of Calls-to -Action

There are three different types of calls-to-action discussed in this tool. While each type aims to encourage visitors to perform a certain action, that action can vary considerably. Below are the most common types of calls-to-action, all of which are based on prospect needs.

General Concerns :
These calls-to-action provide next steps for individuals looking to collect more information on a variety of topics

1. **Learn More**
The "Learn More" or Request for Information call-to-action is ubiquitous on COE websites—both homepages and program-specific pages. As a result, visitors are especially attuned to poorly crafted forms or calls-to-action. They are particularly sensitive to burdensomely long and/or redundant forms—especially if they are uncertain how or if the information will be used. While Request for Information forms must be present, you should take care to make them well-crafted (of the appropriate length, only asking for information that will be used, etc.).

2. **RSVP for an Event**
RSVP calls to action are used to encourage visitors or email recipients to participate in virtual or in-person events (info sessions, chats, etc.). The action is a nice intermediate step for those prospects who know they are interested in your institution or program and, while they are not yet ready to apply, they are ready to take an additional step.

3. **Allow Us to Engage with You**
This type of call to action can take many forms, from encouraging prospects to follow you on social media, sign up for an email or RSS feed, or join a social media group. Termed "permission marketing" by marketing guru Seth Godin, these requests are a way of asking for the privilege of delivering personal and relevant messages to people who actually want to get them. As Godin explains, "[Permission marketing] recognizes the new power of the best consumers to ignore marketing. It realizes that treating people with respect is the best way to earn their attention. Pay attention is a key phrase here, because permission marketers understand that when someone chooses to pay attention they are actually paying you with something precious. And there's no way they can get their attention back if they change their mind. Attention becomes an important asset, something to be valued, not wasted."[1]

1) "*Permission Marketing.*" n.d.. http://sethgodin.typepad.com/seths_blog/2008/01/permission-mark.html (accessed 5 Dec 2013)

Calls-to-Action Primer

Specific Concerns
These calls-to-action are ideal for individuals that have specific questions or content needs and the motivation to seek answers; usually prospects who follow these calls are further along in their decision-making process.

4. **Contact Us**

   Some variation of this call-to-action is consistently found on program pages, institution or unit homepages, and emails alike. For all the customized calls to action you feature, some prospects will want to bypass all the micro-actions you architected for the direct answer to their specific questions (you can think of this as the “press ‘0’ for a customer service agent” option). You should encourage this action as much as possible; personalizing the “contact us” link with the names and photos of staff members is one way of providing encouragement.

5. **Instant Chat with an Advisor**
   This call-to-action is a great option for prospects with quick, transactional questions and for international prospects who are uncomfortable with calling or inconvenienced by significant time differences. Although the reason for the instant chat may be transactional, the advisor on the end of the line should see it as an opportunity to collect valuable information about prospects’ goals and concerns while also directing them to additional resources. If you use this call-to-action, it is critical that someone staffs the line during all business hours and ideally for periods outside of business hours as well.

6. **Download**
   Download calls are typically used as a carrot for collecting more information about the prospect. They are particularly appealing to prospects who want a more in-depth exploration of risks and opportunities. A short form usually follows the visitor’s request to download the content—usually a brochure. Making the content “free” with the completion of a small form also plays on a psychological element that makes reading the brochure more attractive than just reading the same content posted publically without the download button. Moreover, information collected through a mandatory pre-download form can be used to score leads.

7. **Take a Trial/Demo**
   Most commonly encountered on COE websites offering online programs, “trial” or “demo” buttons allow visitors to experience some aspect(s) of the course without making a full commitment. Trials or demos can range from screen-shot captures of the online student interface, to a video walking someone through the platform, to a recording of an online lecture, to limited access to the LMS, to a full demo course. This call to action is particularly attractive to prospective students that are looking for more information—usually because they are uncertain of their ability to handle the workload, to become comfortable with modality, and/or to navigate the interface. Demos should be prefaced by a brief form collecting the interested prospect’s name and contact information and possibly a few pieces on their primary areas of interest or concern.

Calls-to-Action Primer

Ready to Commit
These calls-to-action are the last steps prospects take before taking the final macro-action of actually submitting an application or registering for a program.

8. **Add to Cart/Enroll/Register**
Though typically only used by organizations offering individual courses (with few or no application steps), the "add to cart" (sometimes called "add to backpack") is the most straightforward way of encouraging visitors to purchase. The call and icon (usually a shopping cart or backpack) are positioned on individual course pages. Many institutions use the "enroll" or "register" call-to-action in place of "add to cart" either out of tradition or out of wariness of being too commercial (though no research that the Forum has found has surfaced those fears). The benefit of using the "add to cart" button is the ability to send push reminders to prospects (assuming you have their contact information) if they do not follow through and purchase the items in their cart. It also provides a helpful bookmark-like feature for courses of interest so that the purchase is easier when prospects who do not purchase in a single sitting decide to come back to it later.

9. **Apply**
The "add to cart" equivalent for programs that require an application. This call to action tends to be particularly overused in emails and is too often unsupported by other micro-actions. As the ultimate "macro-action" (i.e., the final action you are driving your prospects towards), this action is a big step for all but the most motivated visitors.

Top 16 Ways of Making Your Calls-to-Action Noticeable

Channel-Agnostic Recommendations

1. **Use simple, direct language.**

Example	Counterexample
APPLY NOW! →	Click here to start your application now!

2. **Convey a sense of urgency, need, or value in your calls-to-action (without being too pushy).** Use an action verb that is urgent, such as "signup", "download", "subscribe", and "register." Tread carefully around the "apply now" call to action—it is connotes a larger, riskier action, so urgency might actually dissuade prospects.

Example
Learn Powerful Strategies for Managing Stress Download Now - Free • Identify symptoms of stress • Assess your level and sources of stress • Learn stress management techniques • Develop a stress-management action plan

Calls-to-Action Primer

Channel-Agnostic Recommendations (Continued)

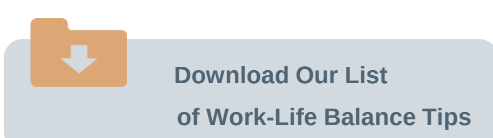
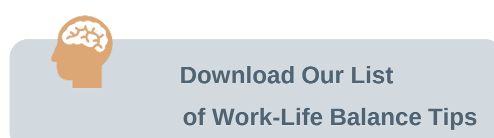
3. **Make sure calls-to-action stand out**—either using bold, different colored text, or off-sets (e.g., buttons).

Example	Counterexample
Bold color  Image Credit: vuze.com	 Image Credit: Omniture.com

4. **Prioritize calls-to-action if there are more than one on a given webpage or email.** This can be done in a number of ways, but the most common ways is through the use of color and size.

Example	Counterexample
 Image Credit: scoutlabs.com *Yellow indicates priority*	 Image Credit: forrester.com

5. **Use icons to increase conversion rates, though make sure their meaning is clear.**

Example	Counterexample
	

Calls-to-Action Primer

Channel-Agnostic Recommendations (Continued)

6. **Use different levels of calls to actions in order to speak to different stages of the funnel**—you want any prospect to find a suitable next step.

Example

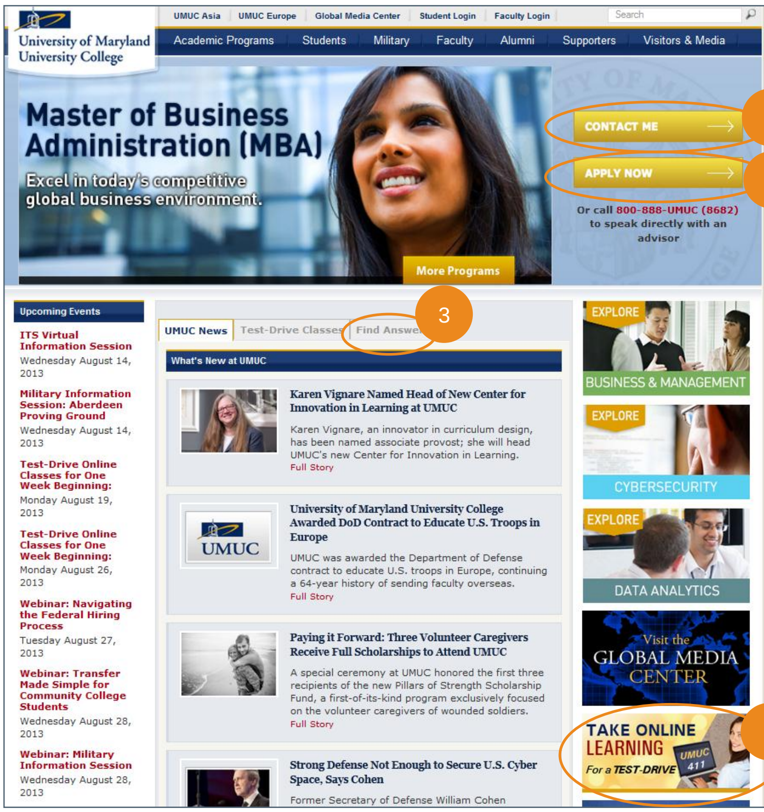
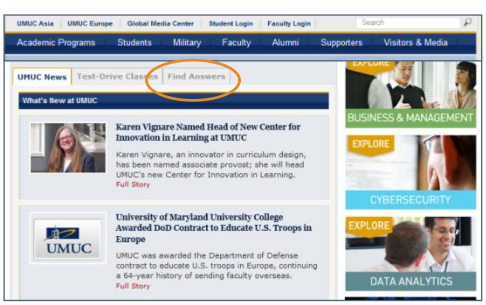


Image Credit: umuc.edu

1. Contact Me 2. Apply Now 3. Find Answers 4 Take Online Learning for a Test Drive

Website Recommendations

7. **Make sure there's enough space around your calls to action so that they don't feel cluttered.**

Example	Counterexample
 Image Credit: umuc.edu	 Image Credit: galpin.com

Calls-to-Action Primer

Website Recommendations (Continued)

8. Your call-to-action buttons should ideally be the largest buttons on the page.

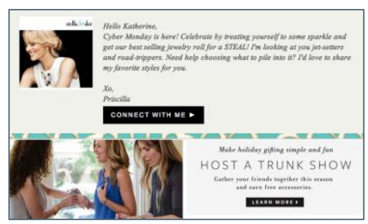
<table>
<tr><th>Example</th><th>Counterexample</th></tr>
<tr><td>

Image Credit: postbox-inc.com</td><td>

Image Credit: uscellular.com</td></tr>
</table>

9. Use contrasting colors to make smaller buttons stand out more and use less distinct colors to make oversized buttons fit in better.

<table>
<tr><th>Example</th><th>Counterexample</th></tr>
<tr><td>

Image Credit: signalapps.com</td><td>

www.stelladot.com</td></tr>
</table>

Email

10. Position Calls to Action Across the Funnel

Calls to action included in emails can be deployed according to your best guess at where in the funnel a prospect falls. Use the map below for a sense of which calls to action are most appropriate at each stage. Of course, *content* should also be curated in light of stage in the funnel. For more information about how content needs evolve, see Tool #19.

Stage	**Prospect**		**Application in Progress**		**Application Submitted/Accepted**
C to A	*Learn more*	*Trial/Demo* *RSVP* *Download* *Instant Chat*	*Apply* *Add to Cart*	*Instant Chat*	*RSVP* *Trial/Demo* *Download*

Contact Us — *Permission marketing*

Calls-to-Action Primer

Email (Continued)

11. **Lead with a call to action by including it in the email subject line.**
12. **Include no more than three calls to action in any given email.**
13. **Make sure links lead directly to the most relevant page**—click-through rates are low enough to begin with; indirect links in emails will only discourage recipients from following links in the future.
14. **Weave calls-to-action into the body of your email.** Those calls that do not fit with the email's theme can be included in bold at the bottom of the email below the signature
15. **Following up with the enrollment counselor should always be included as an email call-to-action.**
16. **Map calls-to-action to the stage of the funnel an email recipient is in** (a level of customization website calls to action don't offer as easily).

Subject: Join us to learn powerful strategies for managing stress

Dear Delilah,

With the demands of work, school, family, and other commitments, it's not uncommon to experience some level of stress. In fact, many consider it a normal part of everyday life. Left unchecked, however, ongoing stress can quickly give rise to more serious problems – stealing from our health, happiness, and success.

Learn how to recognize, manage, and cope with stress – and bring balance back into your life – at the Example University webinar, "Stress: The Insidious Leveler of Good Unsuspecting People," held virtual on December 11, at noon Eastern time.

Join us as presenters Dr. Milton Bradley, program director for the B.S. in Communication, M.S. in Leadership, and M.S. in Human Resources programs; and Dr. Samuel Samuelson, contributing faculty member for Example U's College of Health Sciences, discuss powerful strategies for managing stress. You will learn to:

- Identify symptoms of stress.
- Analyze your stress level and dangers.
- Assess causes of stress.
- Examine a variety of stress management techniques.
- Develop a stress management action plan.

This webinar is free to attend. Register today! Please be in touch if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Amelia Bedelia
Enrollment Advisor
Example University
1-XXX-XXX-XXXX, ext. XXXXX
ameliabedelia@exampleu.edu

P.S. Do you know a friend or colleague who might be interested in earning their degree at Example U? Please pass along this invitation.