THE ULTIMATE GUIDE TO

Inbound Marketing for Flight Schools

A guide to Inbound Marketing and how to succeed at it

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Imagine *Flight*

1/ Introduction

What is inbound marketing and how can it help your school?

Inbound marketing helps you talk to the customers you want to reach, about the things they are interested in.

Once upon a time, customers looking for a flight school went to the nearest airport and walked in your front door. You just needed to be there with a quick sales pitch and in 30 minutes or less you'd have them signed up for an intro flight.

Today, that approach doesn't work nearly as well as it use to. People are still starting flight training but the way they find, research, and choose a flight school has changed. Prospective customers are turning to the internet for information regularly and predictably—it's your job to be their answer.

That's where inbound comes in. Outbound marketing tactics like print ads, billboards, radio spots, and direct mail are very common in flight training but, unfortunately, they're also very ineffective. There's no guarantee your marketing materials are reaching the right customers. Even when they do, it's easy for them to ignore your ads and it's difficult to link these tactics to new customers.

In short, outbound marketing is hard to correctly target, easy to tune out, and difficult to measure.

Fortunately for you, there's a better way.

Inbound marketing helps you talk to the customers you want to reach about the things they want to know. Instead of hoping that 5% of your mailing list is a good fit for your flight school, you can use inbound marketing to help the right customers find you online, then nurture them from anonymous website visitors to new customers.

We know that all good arguments have supporting evidence, so here's some for you: Schools who use inbound marketing are seven times more likely to report higher ROI than schools using outbound marketing. And inbound leads are three times more qualified than leads acquired through outbound methods.

To help you understand how it works, we're going to take you through the inbound methodology.

The Inbound Methodology

The inbound methodology for flight schools has four steps: **Attract, Convert, Nurture, Close**. The tools you'll need to use at each stage are listed in this handy funnel graphic.

ATTRACT	CONVERT	NURTURE	CLOSE
Web Traffic Blog Social Media	Calls to Action Forms Landing Pages	Newsletter Segmenting Email Nurturing	Open Houses Intro Flights

In this ebook, you'll learn how each of these four steps applies to your school and how to use inbound techniques to convert prospective customers from website visitors to intro flights and new customers.

2/ Attract

Getting the right prospective customer to your website

Inbound marketing levels the playing field.

The first step of the inbound methodology is to attract the right people to your site. After all, you can't nurture and convert leads into customers unless you have a base of visitors to work with. This seems like a daunting task. For smaller schools and training operations that are just getting started, it's difficult to build traffic and get found when you're competing with established schools that seem to dominate search engine traffic and have money to spend on paid search ads.

The bad news is that you can't click your heels and instantly shoot to the top of search rankings or quadruple your traffic. But there's good news too: *Inbound marketing levels the playing field*. Regardless of your marketing budget, you can use inbound marketing to own your search engine ranking instead of paying to maintain it, build your online presence, and attract the right visitors.

But before you get started, take a second to ask yourself a very important question. You're reading this ebook because you want to boost new customer starts or increase the quality of your leads. Let's say you succeed—what does the perfect customer look like?

To answer this question, you'll have to create **customer personas**.

What are Customer Personas?

Simply put, <u>a customer persona is a semi-fictional representation of your ideal customer based on market research and real data about your existing customers</u>. When creating your customer personas, consider including demographics, behavior patterns, motivations, and goals. The more detailed you are, the better!

WHY DO PERSONAS MATTER?

Personas are the foundation of your school's inbound marketing strategy. Think of all the people that come to your site on a daily basis—be it perspective professional pilots, recreational pilots looking for a new rating, business people that need a better way to travel, or former customers that want to rent a plane for the weekend … the list goes on.

If any of those people walked into your school you wouldn't tell them all the same thing, and certainly wouldn't offer them the exact same training package. *You'd tailor your interactions* based on their background, needs, and wants. Your marketing should work the same way—different types of leads should receive different information and experiences.

Developing personas allows you to segment your marketing outreach so you can take a personalized, targeted approach.

HOW DO I CREATE A PERSONA?

When you're putting together your personas, look at the characteristics of your most successful applicants. What do they have in common? How can you identify those characteristics?

You can gather this information through a combination of market research and interviews or surveys of current customers and instructors. Depending on what your marketing goals are, you could have one or two personas, or as many as 10.

We recommend getting started with the two or three personas that will be responsible for the majority of your traffic. These core personas should be your focus as you develop your inbound marketing strategy so you don't spread yourself too thin. As you start to see results from your efforts, you can begin to target and attract your remaining personas, but they're icing on the cake!

EXAMPLE PERSONA – ASPIRING ADAM
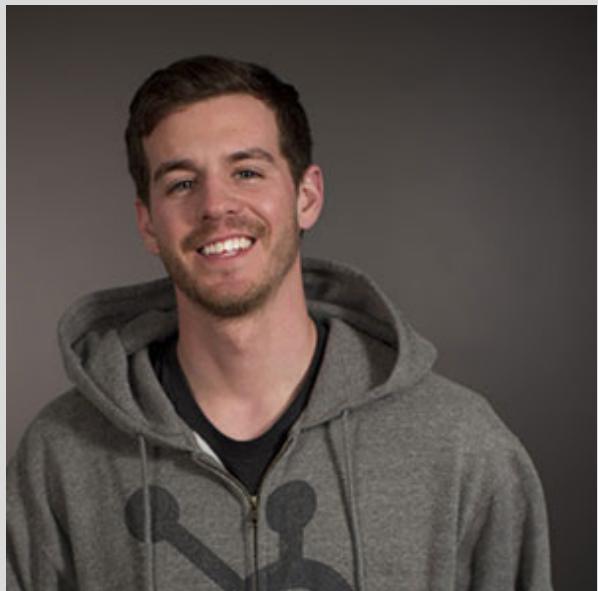
Adam is a 22-35 years old male that lives with roommates in a city. He attended a large undergraduate institution, and has been working full-time for a few years. He's currently making $35,000 - $50,000 a year in a career field he doesn't like.

Adam is thinking about changing careers, since his current job doesn't make him happy. He wants to travel and see the world. He values experiences but wants to be financially stable. He's worried about the short-term outlook for airline pilots and the transition from a full-time job to being a student.

Now that you've created a persona or two, you can start to use them to guide your decisions across all of your sales and marketing efforts. But don't get overwhelmed by making huge changes at this point. Remember even small improvements in your marketing can have a big impact on your bottom line. Let move on to the next step in attracting customers, SEO & Keywords.

SEO & Keywords

SEO stands for search engine optimization. Search engines "crawl" website content, then file and rank the pages they find. SEO determines how well your webpages can be found by search engines for a specific keyword query—or "organic search". Content can help you improve this rank to be found more easily and often.

HOW DO I GET STARTED?

Pick your keywords.

You've created your target personas. Now, think about your persona's challenges. What content can you create that's relevant to those concerns? What information will they be looking for that you can provide?

Once you have a list of topics, it's time to create keywords. The more specific these keywords are, the better—it's extremely difficult to differentiate yourself for the search term "flight school," but you can create specific content for the term "airline pilot flight school."

It's essential to keep in mind that *keywords containing your school's name aren't the right keywords to aim for.* The vast majority of prospects aren't searching for your specific flight school! Inbound marketing works because people looking for information related to

their interests and needs will find you if you've created great content around those topics.

These long, specific keywords are called **long tail keywords**. You can use keywords to anchor each piece of content you write. Here's some examples:

- 'How to be an airline pilot'
- 'Best way to become a pilot'
- 'Using GPS for instrument flight plan'

Why does SEO matter?

Your website's placement in search results is a fundamental determinant of whether you'll get found online. 80% of people never click past the first page of search results on Google. But the good news for inbound marketers is that 80% of people also skip the sponsored results and click on organic search results only.

HOW DO I GET STARTED?

Conduct interviews.

Nobody knows your current customers' needs better than your current customers and flight instructors. Ask your customers what information they were looking for and what content they would have found helpful when they were researching flight schools.

Your flight instructors wield another valuable perspective. They're the ones working with customers every day, and can tell you what customers frequently ask about. You can also leverage resources that already exist—the FAQ section of your website or collateral that's given to prospective customers will give you insight into what customers care about.

Use a keyword planning tool to get suggestions.

Search engines own a mountain of data on what people are searching for. You can (and should!) use this data to your advantage. Once you have a list of long tail keywords, enter them into a keyword planning tool. Look at the average monthly search volume, as well as the difficulty of ranking for each term.

Be strategic in choosing which keywords you're trying to rank for. You'll have to balance a keyword's search volume (the higher, the better) with how competitive it is to rank for.

The competition referred to in keyword planning tools refers to how many advertisers are buying sponsored search results for that term, not an assessment of how difficult it is to rank for a given term. However, while organic results are more likely to be clicked than paid ones, a high competitiveness rating is a signal that there's a lot of interest in this area.

WHERE DO I PLACE KEYWORDS?

Everywhere. Search engines read everything on your website.

Maintaining a regular blog is a great way to scale an SEO strategy. You can continually add new blog posts, which refreshes and boosts your SEO rankings regularly. It also makes you seem more legitimate in the customer's eyes—they're more likely to trust a school that's published multiple blog posts around the same topic than one with one post from nine months ago (or one that only has pages advertising their own programs).

But you don't need to blog to build a keyword strategy. If they include great content that's relevant to perspective customers, *each page on your site is an opportunity to create content*. Ideally, each page should be optimized around only one keyword. This way, search engines know that each page serves a specific purpose and will rank the page for that keyword.

Blogging

Hold on. You're a flight school, not a publication or news site. Plus, you already have a news and events section on your site. Why do you need a blog? As it turns out, there are three very good reasons why.

1 | **SEO**
It's simple—the more content you have on your website, the better chance you have of ranking high in search results. You can only include so many informational pages on your website, so blogging is the place to grow your online presence and give search engines more content to scan. As a best practice, each blog post should also be optimized for one keyword.

2 | **Tell your story**
It's not necessarily easy to differentiate your school though the courses you offer or the aircraft you operate. But you can use your blog to answer prospective customers' questions while showcasing unique experiences. For example, a blog post series highlighting fun places to fly in your local area offers insights into the types of things prospective customers could do once they earn their pilots certificate.

3 | **Engage with visitors**
The value of inbound marketing lies in getting your anonymous website visitors to convert into known entities that you can sort into personas and nurture. A blog is often the first place a visitor lands, and is your first opportunity to obtain information about them. Include links and calls-to-action (CTAs) in all blog posts that can lead to areas of your website where you're able to capture visitor information such as email, interests, and job title.

USING SOCIAL MEDIA TO INCREASE YOUR REACH

Blogging helps build your online visibility, but it's also an easy way to amplify your social presence. You can re-purpose your content for social channels, or simply use social to share content.

Social media is also a lighter-touch way for prospective customers to interact with you. They may not want to subscribe to a blog, take an intro flight, or download an ebook right now, but if they "like" a Facebook page, they'll still see your updates. As with blogs, include CTAs in your social media copy to further engage and learn more about your followers.

What's next?

You've created personas, researched keywords, and written blog posts. All of this work goes a long way towards your marketing goals. Now, you'll have to leverage this content to convert visitors into leads.

3/ Convert

Transforming your anonymous traffic into known visitors

Conversion is the point at which the unknown turns into the known.

Your website content is up and running, and you're starting to gain more traffic. But who's visiting your site? How do you connect with your audience?

That's where conversion comes in—the moment at which the unknown turns into the known.

Getting Started With Conversion

Any place in your website where a visitor has to fill out his or her name, email address, and other information to access content is known as a **conversion point**.

You probably already have conversion points on your website—forms website visitors fill out to sign up for an information session, register for a intro flight, or request a contact. But these are all late-stage conversion points. Prospective customers who aren't ready to start flight training yet most likely won't take the time to attend an info session or take a intro flight.

CONVERSION POINTS: THE EARLIER, THE BETTER

You wouldn't buy a car or request a test drive after visiting a dealership's website once. So why should you expect customers to sign up for an intro flight just because they've found your school online?

Choosing a flight school is a pretty big decision, so don't expect that prospective customers will be ready to make the commitment to sign up for an intro flight after their first visit to your website.

Instead, *capture their information as early as you can with smaller asks*. For example, you could include a CTA to download a sample private pilot syllabus at the end of a blog post about a customer's first solo, then nurture people who downloaded it with more information about your aircraft, simulators, and more!

Think of a conversion point as an exchange of information. You get a prospective customer's name, email address, and other contact information … but what do they get?

Enter **offers**. The term "offer" is just another word for a piece of educational content. Offers can be anything—ebooks like this one, templates for flight planning, webinars with flight instructors, or even quizzes to help determine what kind of school is right for them, just to name a few. What's special about offers is that they are gated, and can only be accessed after visitors fill out a **landing page**—the site page where you collect their contact information. Typically, a conversion follows these steps:

1 | **Visitor clicks a CTA.**
CTAs can be placed anywhere on your site. The end of blog posts is a great way to capitalize on the great content the visitor just finished, but you can also include CTAs on regular site pages.

2 | **Visitor fills out information on a landing page.**
After the visitor clicks on your CTA, they'll be taken to a separate site page. This page should contain information about the offer and a form that will capture their contact information.

3 | **Visitor reaches a "thank you" page and the offer.**
Thank you pages include a link to download the offer. You should also email a copy of the offer to visitors.

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The process for creating offers is similar to creating blog posts. Offers may not live on your blog, but ultimately they're just another form of content that should reflect what prospective customers are looking to learn more about. Source ideas and content from your existing blogger base, and ask them if they're willing to take a stab at something a little different.

WHAT KINDS OF OFFERS SHOULD I CREATE?

Think outside the box! Ebooks are far from the only type of offer you can create. Whether it's making a template for helping customers plan their training, or a handy preflight checklist, offers can take any shape or form you can imagine. Here are some ideas to get you started:

- Sample Private Pilot syllabus
- Example cross-country lesson
- Guide to choosing a flight school
- Day in the life of an airline pilot
- In-flight video of a lesson
- Guide to using an airplane for business
- Airline interview tips & tricks
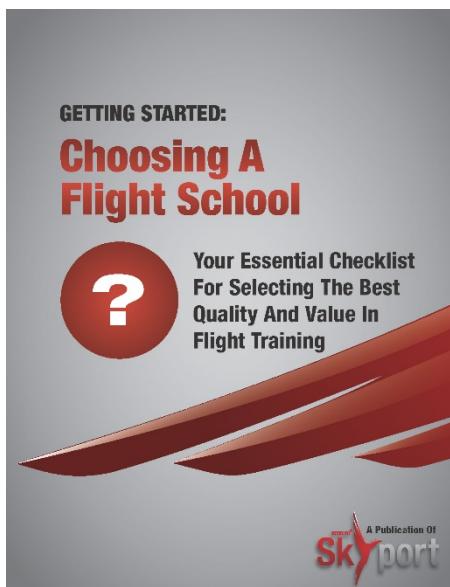
Sample checklist created by Redbird Skyport

Landing Page Best Practices

You've created a killer offer—now it's time to build a landing page that will entice prospective customers to convert. Any good landing page should have the following elements:

1	Clear, action-oriented header
2	1-5 sentences explaining the offer and its value
3	Numbers, bullets, and bolding in the copy so it's easy to scan
4	Relevant image or two
5	Relevant form fields
6	Content above the fold to minimize the need to scroll
7	No links—you don't want visitors to get distracted

4/ Close

Turning visitors into customers

Use email nurturing to turn visitors into intro flights into customers

After a conversion, you have your visitor's contact information! But to turn them from a visitor into an intro flight and eventual customer, you'll need to do a little more work. It sounds like a gargantuan task to turn a random visitor into a customer, but it's actually a process that can be broken down into simple steps. You'll have to use email lists to nurture prospective customers.

Purchased Lists: The Ugly Truth

Do you buy lists? If you do, stop! I remember very well being bombarded with mail packets and emails from flight schools I'd never heard of after I got my Student Pilot certificate—and ultimately, my decisions on where to take flight training weren't affected by single one of them.

That's because I was part of a list that these schools purchased from companies that compile FAA airmen records for outreach purposes, not an actual qualified lead. Lists are a bad investment for marketers at flight schools to make for a few reasons:

- They cost money with no guarantee of return.
- The information may not be accurate.
- People that are part of the list don't necessarily want to hear from you.

Why waste money and effort reaching out to disengaged prospects when you can reallocate your time and resources toward attracting qualified lead to your school?

Workflows & Nurturing

Think back to the funnel you saw at the beginning of this ebook. Your goal is to get customers from the left to the right—a process known as **nurturing**.

Marketers use pre-planned **workflows** to nurture leads. Each workflow should be tailored to a specific lead's needs, and are generally a series of emails containing helpful content, offers, and CTAs.

HOW DO I DESIGN A WORKFLOW?

Before you launch an email workflow, ask yourself:

• What action will a prospective customer have to take to be placed into this workflow?

• What kind of actions will a prospective customer have to take to "complete" a workflow (i.e. they sign up for an intro flight)?

• What content are you going to send?

The key to an effective workflow is to *provide value at each stage of the sales cycle* (also known as a buyer's journey). The buyer's journey has three stages: Awareness, Consideration, and Decision. In the Awareness stage, prospects have just begun to research different flight schools and often don't completely understand what they're looking for. In the Consideration stage, they've defined what type of programs or schools they hope to attend. In the Decision stage, they're comparing different schools' programs and making their final selection.

The content you send should always be reflective of the stage of the buyer's journey the prospective customer is currently at. After all, you wouldn't want to send someone who just decided that they want to go to flight school a list of your schools currency requirements for rental aircraft.

Relevant content at each stage of the journey could look like this:

- Awareness: "Guide: Is Learning to Fly Right for You?"

- Consideration: "What to Look for in a Flight School"

- Decision: "Sample Private Pilot Syllabus"

The last thing to consider is who will enter each workflow. You wouldn't send the same information to someone wanting to fly for fun as you would someone looking to start a career in aviation. You'll have to segment the information you send by persona. The fields you'll include on your landing pages will determine what persona and subsequent workflow each applicate will fall under.

Nurturing emails and the offers they contain can be a bit more self-promotional than your blog content. A prospect who's given you their email has signaled that they want to learn more about your specific school. That means that while they're not necessarily ready to pull the trigger on getting started, they're certainly interested. Now is the time to provide targeted content that will help them move to the next stage of the buyer's journey.

So even if it's too early to send an email with a big "Take An Intro Flight" button, you can craft content around how your school can cater to a specific interest or type of customer.

That's All, Folks!

Congratulations—you now have all the know-how you need to get started with inbound marketing.

Getting started on a new marketing initiative designed to drive a metric as important as new customer starts can be daunting.

Don't try to do everything at once: Take baby steps and tackle one piece of the funnel at a time—starting with just one of your personas can help you test out your efforts and determine best practices for the future.