

Recruiting & Retaining Adult Learners

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MARKETING

Engineering answers: Honing your AI prompts for more effective results

By Donna Talarico

A few months ago, I was watching an episode of *Star Trek: Discovery*. Just deemed acting captain, the character Saru has a conversation with the ship's computer about leadership qualities. He wasn't getting the answers he'd hoped for, but he pressed on, rephrasing the question, getting more specific answers each time.

He started by asking for a list of the most decorated Starfleet captains and then ultimately worked his way to: "Computer, initiate new protocol. Please record all data related to my performance as acting captain of Discovery, and cross-reference with success parameters. Note where deviations occur."

The moment struck a chord with me, as someone who has tried to interact with artificial intelligence online. Prompt engineering, whether in reality or science fiction, is not a novel concept; however, it's an emerging area of interest for many frontline marketing and communications professionals. In a previous column we shared a roundup of expert insight about ChatGPT and similar AI-powered resources. This month, we'll dive deeper into best practices in prompt engineering.

First, just what is prompt engineering? According to Techpedia, it is "a technique used in AI to optimize and fine-tune language models for particular tasks and desired outputs." Also called prompt design, this skill is becoming more and more in demand. There are a few principles to keep in mind for effective prompt engineering, which I cover below.

Be specific (and course correct as you go)

Say I was working on a marketing email for an MBA program. I could use ChatGPT to generate ideas for content. To illustrate how results can change based on the query, I started with general queries and then continued to rephrase my question/prompt.

Of course, there's not enough space to share the full ChatGPT responses in this column; but to give you an idea of the progression, here's a list of the evolution of my prompt:

- Why should I earn an MBA?
- Why should I earn an MBA online?
- Answer in a brief paragraph in a conversational tone: How will an MBA improve my earning potential and quality of life?
- Write a persuasive email about the benefits of earning an MBA online.
- Write a short, persuasive email about the benefits of earning an MBA online with the goal of the recipient requesting more information.

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As you can see from the bulleted list, even minor changes can impact the results. For example, “earning an MBA online” is more specific than “earn an MBA.”

Likewise, giving the directive of “short” or “persuasive” or “conversational” can help finesse the output. Finally, tacking on a specific goal for the user after reading the content, such as requesting information, will continue to flesh out the ideal email copy.

Be clear and succinct

We might want our web content or marketing copy to be conversational, but being direct with your AI partner will yield better results. As you write your prompts, be clear and be brief. The OpenAI knowledge base (help.openai.com) suggests eliminating “fluff” in your prompts; it gives this example:

- *Less effective:* The description of this product should be fairly short, a few sentences only, and not too much more.
- *Better:* Use a three- to five-sentence paragraph to describe this product.

Build constraints

As alluded to in the two previous tips, specificity can be furthered by setting constraints. For example, an open-ended question could result in an 800-word output.

Setting stricter parameters, as well as including situational context, can get you better results.

Use with caution

AI tools can help save time on administrative-type tasks, and they can even offer a good start to content creation. However, every school, program, and student is different; these nuances are something only a human with institutional knowledge (and maybe creative flair) can address.

To illustrate, here are a few prompts, and the resulting headlines centered on bachelor’s degree completion:

“There’s much to consider ethically, creatively, and logistically when adding AI to your marketing toolbox.”



Donna Talarico

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Donna Talarico runs an independent content agency and is also the Founder/Publisher of Hippocampus Magazine and Books. She’s worked in marketing and communications for more than 20 years — in radio, e-commerce, and higher ed — and most recently as a director of communications at a small, private college. She lives in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. ■

➤ **Write a headline for why you should finish your bachelor’s degree:** “Empower Your Potential: Why Completing Your Bachelor’s Degree Is the Key to Success!”

➤ **Write a persuasive headline for why you should finish your bachelor’s degree after taking a break from school:** “Seize Your Second Chance: Why Resuming Your Bachelor’s Degree After a Break Guarantees a Brighter Future!”

➤ **Write a persuasive headline for why you should finish your bachelor’s degree online after taking a break from school:** “Transform Your Education, Anywhere: The Compelling Advantages of Completing Your Bachelor’s Degree Online After a Break!”

As you can see, the results improved with each new prompt; however, they are still somewhat trite and generic. You could use these as a jumping-off point, but a little TLC might be needed to fit your brand messaging.

There’s much to consider ethically, creatively, and logistically when adding AI to your marketing toolbox. Learning to “talk” to platforms like ChatGPT is one step toward success. ■

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