

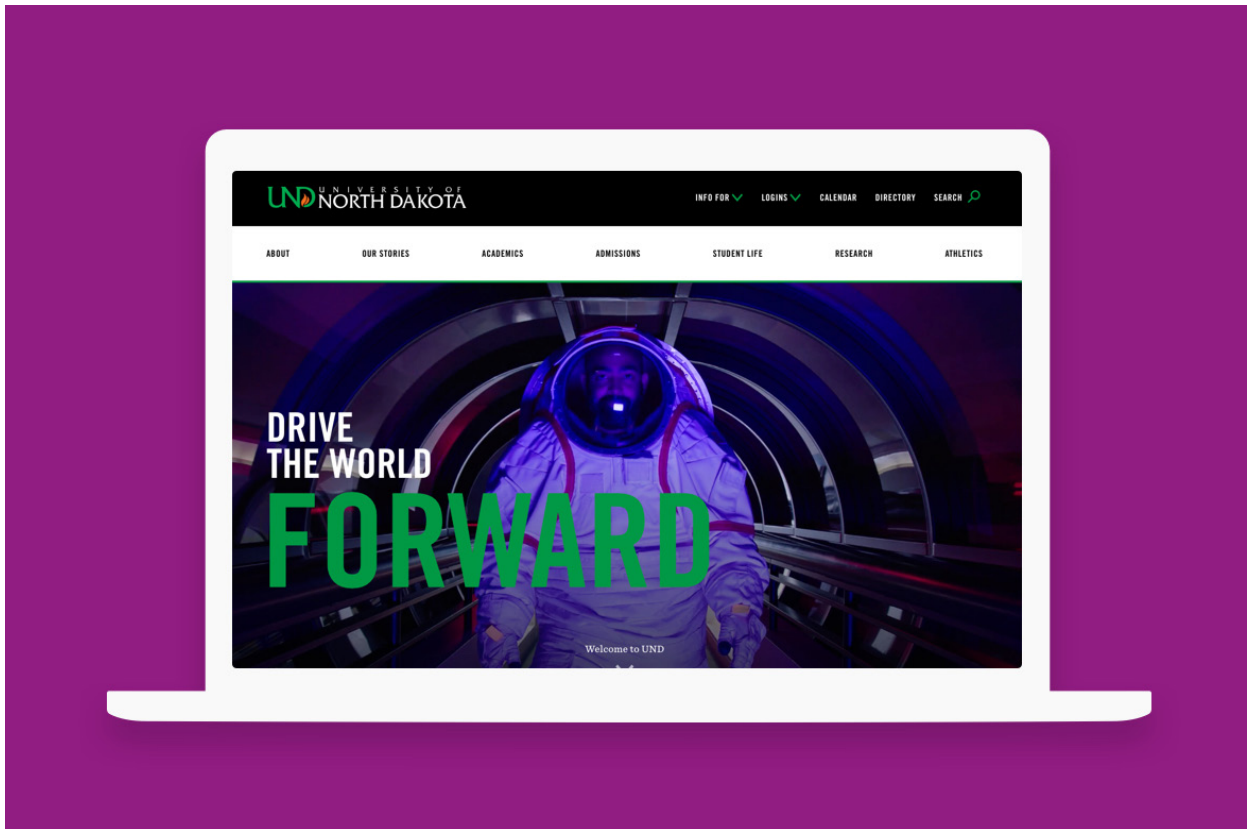
A man wearing sunglasses and a dark jacket is holding a large model airplane. The airplane is white with orange and blue accents. The background is a blurred outdoor setting, possibly a field or airfield. The text "Embracing Location, Community, and Values" is overlaid in white on the image.

Embracing Location, Community, and Values

The University of North Dakota has always been ahead of its time.

Founded in 1883, six years before the state itself was established, the University of North Dakota (UND) gave North Dakota its name when the former Dakota territories separated into two distinct states. Today, UND is a busy, 550-acre campus, the state's largest. It has emerged as an innovator in medicine, law, energy, aviation, and aerospace. The university is increasingly regarded as one of the top academic and research institutions in the nation. And, as any college sports fan will tell you, it's an athletic powerhouse.

Like many schools, UND initially built and grew its website piece by piece, without a unified vision. In 2010, the university introduced a content management system (CMS). This effort to streamline branding and navigation didn't require everyone to use it, however. Without centralized management, the site eventually ballooned to more than 30,000 pages that varied in accuracy, timeliness, and presentation.



Outgrowing the Old Site

When it hired mStoner, UND’s needs were clear: a cohesive site that could serve at least 13,000 students in more than 250 academic programs. Most important, UND wanted to reach an audience it hadn’t expressly prioritized before: prospective students.

“mStoner was on my radar because I view them as a thought leader in the industry,” says Tera Buckley, assistant director of marketing and creative services at UND. “I kind of had a crush on them,” she says with a laugh.

What unfolded was an 18-month project with an extensive scope, including more than 50 deliverables. “Tera and her in-house team were open to pushing boundaries and creating something together that would enhance the perception of UND,” says Ben Bilow, mStoner’s creative director. The massive redesign culminated in a strategic rollout of recruitment-focused pages that are already resonating with the class of 2023.



Developing a Content-First Approach


mStoner recognized that the university’s “North Dakota-ness” was a crucial differentiator, as were its stellar academics and reasonable tuition rates. “You’re getting a top-tier education with an affordable price tag,” says Buckley.

In that spirit, mStoner and UND identified three major content strategy goals:

- Infuse every page with a singular UND brand identity.
- Demonstrate UND’s value to prospective students.
- Embrace North Dakota — its location, community, and values.

Smarter Searching with Funnelback

A major upgrade for UND’s new site was moving to a powerful search technology powered by Funnelback. A team favorite is the university-wide program finder, featured prominently on the homepage. This comprehensive solution showcases the university’s more than 300 programs all in one visually stunning, searchable grid.



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TERA BUCKLEY, ASSISTANT DIRECTOR OF MARKETING & CREATIVE SERVICES AT UND

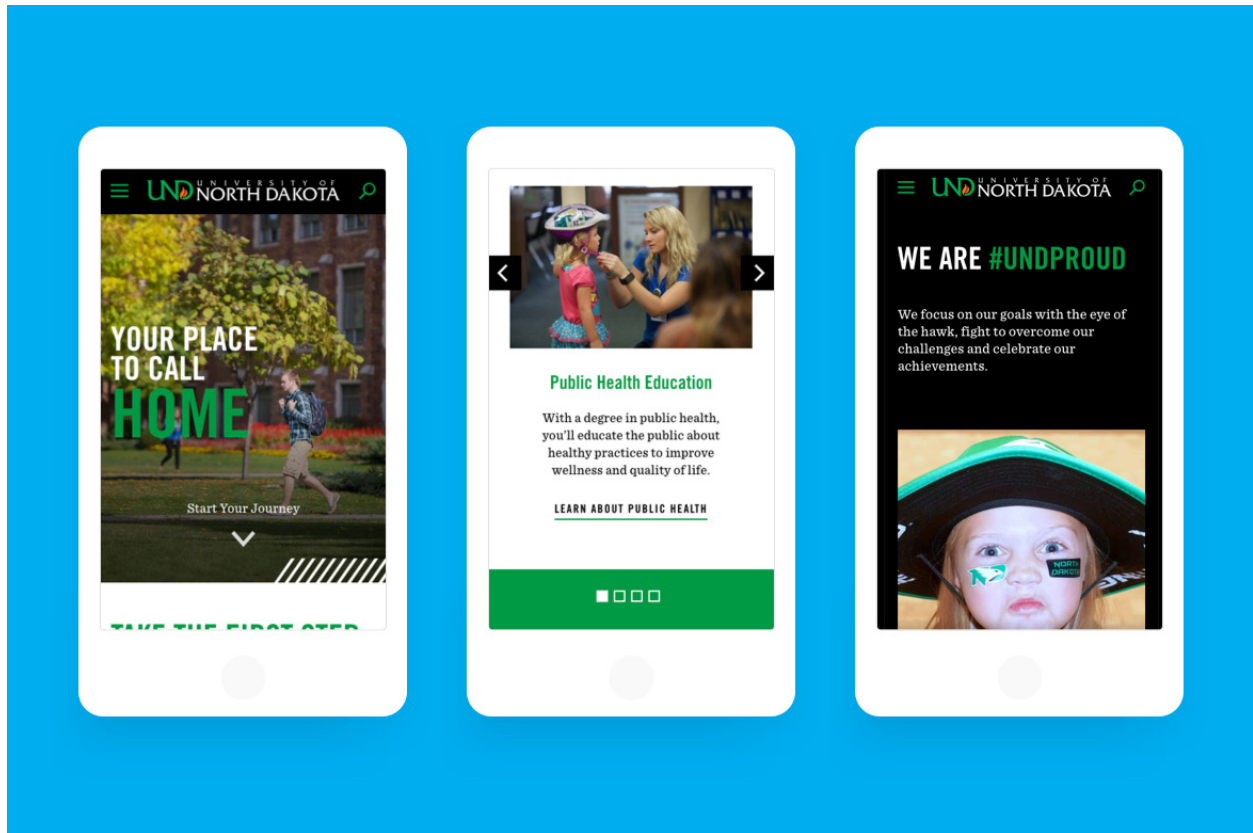
The program finder streamlines the university's messaging, Buckley says "There's a little bit of a marketing slant in the messaging," she says. "We tried very hard to differentiate each program, to give a prospective student a reason to want more information about it."

Funnelback powers the new site search function, "integrating pages and information across university resources," says Greg Zguta, mStoner's director of web development. "It gives users a way to quickly find what they're looking for, because the search applies to programs but also applies to things like administrative offices."

Empowering the team to make content findable was imperative to UND's content-first approach to demonstrating value. Site search is a major form of navigation for many audiences, with the potential to make or break the web experience. Funnelback unites all web content into a single search.

The team at UND started with the easy-to-implement Funnelback for Higher Education. Using curated results and more than 70 auto-tuning ranking factors, Funnelback's technology delivers the most relevant information for each query. "For example, if someone searches for financial aid, we want the financial aid office page to be first result every time," Zguta says.

Funnelback allows the UND team to create sets of preferred search results that are most likely to be relevant to its various audiences. "Each program might have keywords associated with them, and they can be managed over time," Zguta says. No longer is search an arduous task for the web development team to program.



Early Results

Buckley reports that UND’s newly recruitment-focused, search-enhanced site, with straightforward calls to action, is generating leads — lots of them. “So far, we’ve gotten about 1,500 inquiries per month,” she says, noting that this is especially encouraging in the typically slower months of June and July.

The program finder is no small part of the success. This search tool keeps web visitors looking at more pages and spending longer on their site — nearly three times longer than other users. These visitors converted 160% more often to visit the online application.

And the search bar? A 97% increase in usage, UND reports, with more than a third of queries resulting in a click on a promoted search result using the “best bet” feature of Funnelback.

From the first interaction, prospects easily find value on the newly redesigned site. Ahead of its time once again, UND now has the tools to succeed in a digital-first landscape with a memorable web experience.