

The Forum

Student Recruitment:

Discover Your Audience, Message, and Medium

This issue of *The Forum* covers the challenge of recruiting new students to your literacy program and offers creative, well-tested strategies for successful recruitment.

But, before considering strategies to deliver the recruitment message, it is critical to determine the audience being targeted and the message you want to send.

Who Is Your Audience?

To determine your program's audience, consider what kinds of students are already signing up for services. Talk to students to find out about who they are and how they learned about your organization. Discussions with "satisfied customers" can provide insights and inspiration for a recruitment campaign.

It is also important to find out who is not enrolling and why. Contact some students who have dropped out.

You may uncover useful information about obstacles to enrollment, such as lack of child care or transportation. You may discover problems with your service that need to be corrected.

The Message: Be Practical

Once you have a profile of your current or desired audience, you can begin to construct the message. The message should reflect a balance between inspiring

adults to contact you and providing practical information for doing so.

Prospective students will want detailed information, such as a number to call for information and the time and place of tutoring sessions. Include the basics in your initial message. Then invite prospective students to call or visit the office. When they contact your organization, your placement person can provide more information and offer to review the teaching materials or tour the facility. You might also make a slide/tape or video program or have a current student available to answer questions.

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Presentation Matters

Consider the subliminal messages that you send with your recruitment presentation. For instance, if you are portraying actual students in your brochure or news story, portray students who are similar to your target audience. If you want a diverse group of men and women, be sure that the students you portray represent this diversity.

Many effective messages feature current students and

their experiences with the program. These students provide a model of success and self-esteem for others. Avoid a blanket promise of success. This can create unrealistic expectations about the ease of learning to read and may lead to discouragement.

Consider the quality of print materials you create. There is some evidence that slick brochures and flyers may suggest that your program is another large, impersonal institution. This may discourage adults who have experienced failure and frustration in such environments. Keep print materials for students simple, clean, and informal.

The Medium Is the Messenger

The medium is any messenger you use to get your message to prospective students. These messengers include: mass media (television, radio, and newspaper); agencies or professionals who might refer students; and word-of-mouth sources such as family and

friends of nonreaders, other students, volunteer tutors, and volunteer or paid recruiters.

Your choice of messenger depends on the makeup of your community; the time and resources you can devote to recruitment publicity; and cooperation from mass media and agencies. If you have relied heavily on a certain medium in the past and have had poor results or have already "saturated the market," you may want to try some new approaches. Keep track of how many people respond to each approach you try. This will be useful information for future recruitment campaigns.

Based on your audience and message, use the articles in this issue of *The Forum* to generate some new recruiting ideas that are appropriate to your literacy program. Your first recruitment effort might be a committee to help you implement your great ideas. Committee members should include interested community members who can provide a variety of expertise and contacts, current students, tutors, and program staff or administrators.

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Next Issue: Student Retention

A Multifaceted Approach to Student Recruitment:

An Interview with Sandy Schroeffer

"People hear messages seven times or more before they react," says Sandy Schroeffer. "My goal is to get the message out so people will know who to call when they're ready."

Schroeffer coordinates the Alexandria Literacy Project (ALP) at Runestone Regional Learning Center in Alexandria, Minnesota. Her strategy for recruiting new students incorporates mass media, local business, community referrals, and student recruiters.

Wooing the Media

ALP's recruiting campaigns focus on Douglas County, an area in which 65 percent of the predominantly white population lives in rural nonfarm settings. Service and retail jobs, often related to tourism, are the top sources of employment. Mass media is a vital way to reach this population. Says Schroeffer, "In our community with its rural flavor, the local radio stations are very effective for recruitment."

To start promoting literacy services by radio, Schroeffer advises: "Call the radio station and ask who's in charge of recording public service announcements (PSAs). Ask them what the preferred format is. Get help from them with writing, then practice it and time it." Persistence and personal effort are critical. "It's getting to know the person who's in charge," she says. "Drop off your PSA in person. Send thank you notes afterwards. In small town communities, they want to run local stuff."

Television news stories also help get the word out. For one such story, Schroeffer chose an experienced learner and helped him prepare for an interview. The results were "very effective," she says. "It was a profile on him, an employed adult trying to improve himself. It concluded with an overall picture of illiteracy in Minnesota." The station also aired an 800 number for the state literacy office at the end of the program.

Newspaper stories on adult learners reach a different audience. Says Schroeffer, "When we use broadcast media, we target the learner directly. When we use the print media, it's aimed at an 'enabler,' a person who's in a position to refer someone."

For both types of media, Schroeffer emphasizes, "You have to build up your contacts in the media industry. Then you can call them and say, 'I have a learner willing to be interviewed and it's International Literacy Day.'"

For another print-based strategy, ALP produces small, paper "table tents" for display in restaurants, bars, and waiting rooms. Prospective students take the cards and call the program. Schroeffer recalls one student who heard about ALP on the radio, then took a card off a table in town, and finally called.

Working with Businesses

When ALP decided to work more closely with businesses, Schroeffer contacted the local Chamber of Commerce. Schroeffer and another ALP

staff person spoke before the Chamber's education committee. Schroeffer wrote an article for the chamber's newsletter. The word started to get out among business owners, many of whom are active in local service clubs. "Once we spoke at the Chamber of Commerce, we got more requests to speak from other groups," says Schroeffer, who believes the more people know about the program, the more they can recruit students.

Schroeffer isn't shy about going after large companies with local operations. Targeting human resource directors by name, she mailed an introductory letter with program brochures to several big firms. Then, she called to make the personal connection. "Most of them are willing to post our materials and set up table tents. Some have stuffed flyers into paychecks," she says. Two Minnesota chain grocery stores printed grocery bags with the program's phone number advertising free tutoring.

Person to Person Contact

Referrals play an important part in Schroeffer's recruiting strategy. Rural Minnesota's Concentrated Employment Program (CEP), a county social service agency, is a key source for new students. "In the process of distributing our print materials, I went to the agency

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ALEXANDRIA LITERACY PROJECT

A United Way Agency

and talked to people, building personal contact," Schroeffer says. Now, she attends meetings twice a month at CEP to explain the literacy program. She says, "Once you get a referral, it builds."

Referrals have also come from other groups, including technical colleges, group homes, and programs for people with mental illness and special developmental needs.

Students in ALP's Student Leader Program play a vital role in recruitment. Says Schroeffer, "As they become aware of people who struggle with reading and writing, they talk to them one on one and encourage them to go to the program. Some have actually brought people in." Last fall, the program produced a videotape for orientation and outreach with the five learners speaking about their experiences. The new readers have also done PSAs, media interviews, and other activities.

Try Everything Gradually

The broad spectrum of recruitment strategies may seem like too much, but Schroeffer urges a gradual approach. "You can't do it all at once. Try a variety of approaches and find out which ones work best in your community."

*Recruiting Students Through the Media:***Producing Your Own Public Service Announcement**

by **Barbara Dawson**,
*Community Relations
Coordinator, Memphis
Literacy Council,
Memphis, Tennessee*

Almost any literacy program can relate to this: you want to advertise your services to the community, but there's next to no money in the budget for advertising.

Often, a very good solution is to produce a public service announcement (PSA), an advertisement that is aired on television and radio stations as a service to the community.

Whether they are professionally produced or homemade, PSAs are a valuable tool for getting vital information into the hands of those who need it, the "customers" of your agency. They offer a cost-effective way to use the media in recruiting new students.

Over the years, the Memphis Literacy Council has used the services of the city's

mayor, the coach of a wildly popular basketball team, and various other well-known figures to act as PSA spokespersons for the agency. These PSAs worked well, attracting the kind of attention in the community that we hoped they would. Then, we met with our council's student support group, "Students on the Move," and asked them what kind of recruitment advertising they would like to see more of in the future. We were a bit surprised by their answer. The students let us know that they would prefer to send the message about literacy themselves. It's not that they had anything against the celebrity spokespersons we had been using. They merely felt — strongly — that they had a more compelling tale to tell to potential new students. After all, they were the ones who had "been there." They knew what it was like to lack reading and writing skills.

Thus was born the idea for a new kind of public service announcement.

The new announcements would encompass the values of the adult new readers while also getting the attention of all who heard or saw the PSAs.

First, we had to find someone with expertise in marketing and advertising. As it turned out,

one of our staff members was a friend of Robin Johnson, an account executive for one of the city's most prominent advertising agencies.

When Robin agreed to volunteer her time to help produce the PSAs, we realized that we had found a key ingredient: a willing, active volunteer blessed with the know-how to get the job done. Her insights and contacts with local media and production professionals proved invaluable throughout the project.

Robin immediately scheduled a meeting with our student support group and listened as they presented their ideas and opinions about how we should best advertise our services. These ideas were so valuable that it proved difficult to identify just one concept as a focus for the PSA. However, a common theme emerged during this meeting: each new reader had a strong desire to express how he or she had finally mustered the courage to call the Memphis Literacy Council and ask for help.

Armed with the suggestions and enthusiasm of the students, Robin began to formulate the best way to present both the emotion and the message. On the one hand, she wanted to show the students' pride in their accomplishments. At the same time, she wanted to give a good overview of our program, letting the public know that the Memphis Literacy Council offers a broad array of opportunities to learn to read and write.

Her final plan was to have the students present short

testimonials about why they had sought help from the Memphis Literacy Council — and how it had ultimately changed their lives. Robin wrote the first drafts for the PSAs based on these testimonials, given at a second meeting with the students. She then crafted the announcements to include the actual words of the students. The new readers had the opportunity to edit a working draft of the PSAs. After much work, we approved the final scripts.

Six members of the student group agreed to appear in the PSA spots. At this point, Robin contacted a local video production company to help produce the PSAs. Fortunately, the video company agreed to donate its time and services in taping and editing the announcements.

On the scheduled day, six students, two staff members, and Robin met to videotape the spots. After numerous "takes," six new announcements were filmed. The video company did the final production work. Finally, the new public service announcements were completed and delivered to Memphis-area television and cablevision stations.

The result of our efforts was public service announcements that worked for everyone — a little bit professional, a little bit homemade. With all working together, the announcements proved to be extremely valuable in letting the community know about our programs and showing everyone just how important the gift of literacy really is.



"Students on the Move" and other participants gather after producing a PSA for Memphis Literacy Council. Back row: Geo Holmes (camera operator), Connie Houston (staff) Front row: Corey Baker, Felton Allen, Barbara Dawson (staff), Mattine Robison, Morris Brown, and Ernest Carr; Center: Robin Johnson (ad consultant)

Producing a Public Service Announcement

Taking It Step-by-Step

by *Barbara Dawson, Community Relations Coordinator, Memphis Literacy Council, Memphis, Tennessee*

Meet with Students

Getting feedback from a student support group or other new reader network about ways to publicize your program is the most important step. In order to recruit other students effectively, literacy program staff should meet with present "customers" first.

Listen to Students' Ideas

At Memphis Literacy Council, our student group felt that the best way to recruit new students would be to produce a PSA that featured students already enrolled in the program rather than using a local celebrity. Whatever your final idea is, it is important for program staff to involve a new reader group in crafting the actual message presented to the community.

Contact Advertising Consultant

Producing a PSA will require the expertise of someone with background in advertising and marketing. A local advertising firm may be a good source. Your program's director, public relations person, or other appropriate staff should seek someone to provide these services on a volunteer basis.

Have Advertising Consultant Meet with Students

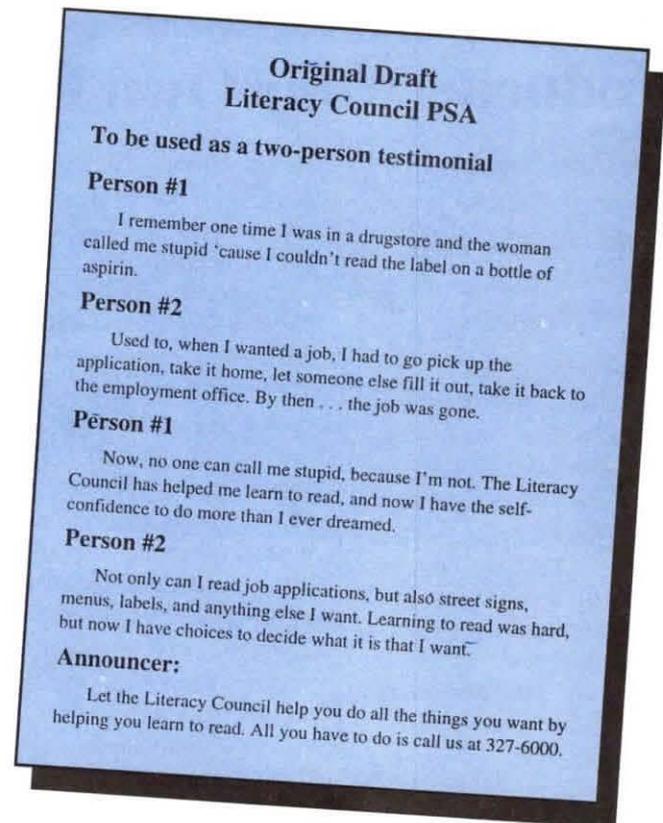
The consultant should meet with new readers to learn more about their experiences and ideas. In our case, the consultant proposed the next step: have each student present a short testimonial about why he or she first called the literacy council for help. A second meeting offers new readers a chance to express their feelings about what made them decide to seek help with their reading skills. These feelings should be recorded for the consultant to write the first draft for the script.

Contact Video Production Company

The consultant or program staff should seek the services of a video production company to tape and edit the PSAs. It's worth trying to get such services donated, all or in part. For instance, our literacy council incurred only the expense of copying the tapes for distribution to area TV stations.

Revise Drafts of Script

Several meetings may be needed to revise the written script produced by the consultant. With the advertising consultant's guidance, students and staff will want to read the scripts carefully and suggest any changes in the text they consider necessary.



Produce Final Script

The consultant completes the final draft for each public service spot. Both the new reader group and council staff may review and proofread it. Then the literacy program approves the final script.

Rehearse PSA

A final meeting of new readers or other speakers allows each person to rehearse the lines in preparation for the actual taping.

Tape Public Service Announcements

The video production company tapes the new readers or other speakers for the announcements. Taping will most likely take place in one day, and require several "takes." In our case, staff, students, and consultant were all present.

Edit PSAs

The video company professionally edits the PSAs and adds the final voice-overs.

Deliver PSAs to Television Stations

Literacy program staff — the public relations coordinator, for instance — can deliver the new public service announcements to television and cable stations in your area. This is a good chance to make personal contact with the station's public service director. Everyone who participated in their creation can look and listen for them to air.

Recruiting in Low-Income, High-Crime Areas

by *Sandy Spencer*,
Executive Director, Kern
Adult Literacy Council,
Bakersfield, California

Kern Adult Literacy Council is the primary basic literacy provider for a population of approximately 650,000 people. Of this number, an estimated 100,000 people or more are in need of the council's literacy services. Budget constraints and lack of volunteer resources mean that we cannot always reach these large numbers of people. To address this problem, the program is developing cooperative alliances throughout the community to recruit students and deliver services.

Collaborative efforts with other community agencies afford the Council expanded resources and broader outreach than we would otherwise have. These partnerships help recruit new students through rehabilitation programs, programs for the developmentally disabled, prisons, city schools, and public housing projects.

A prime example of the council's collaborative recruitment efforts is an inner city housing project where approximately 40,000 families live. This is considered an impoverished to low-income area where unemployment, drugs, and crime are prevalent.

It is also a racially mixed area where gangs keep racial tension high and present a daily threat to thousands of children who grow up there. The numbers of welfare recipients, high school drop-outs, and juveniles on probation are staggering — as is the illiteracy

rate. Unfortunately, this population was almost always unreachable for the literacy council. "Outsiders" are not easily allowed into this environment. "Insiders" don't feel comfortable coming out.

Kern County Housing Authority, with Housing and Urban Development (HUD) money, is trying to address these problems. It offers incentives for home ownership to residents of inner-city neighborhoods in an effort to raise a sense of pride in self and community. Literacy is recognized as a fundamental factor in this equation. Thus, it was a natural development for HUD and the literacy council to join forces in a special project for the community.

In the heart of our community's ghetto, the Housing Authority has equipped one unit of a four-plex to be used as a classroom, and staffed it with a full-time project coordinator who is responsible for overseeing daily functioning of the project.

This includes a home-grown recruitment strategy: obtaining students and volunteers by literally walking the streets and talking to people.

Due to racial tensions, the facility is used on different days of the week by African-Americans and Latinos; hence, we are able to reach two populations through one overall project. Residents of the community are volunteering as tutors in the hope that the project will help some individuals improve their futures. Numbers will grow slowly, but they will grow. In fact, one of the first tutors is a former student at the literacy council.

Another inner-city alliance that has helped us reach new audiences is with the Salvation Army. At intake into the Salvation Army's drug and alcohol rehabilitation program, every man is evaluated using our council's Slossun test. Clients with low reading skills or in need of a GED are strongly encouraged to receive

tutoring. While many men entering the rehabilitation program have low reading skills, others have varying levels of higher education. By training the "readers" in the group to tutor the "low-skilled readers," several things are happening. First, self-esteem is growing from both perspectives, tutor and learner. Second, skills are also being sharpened on both sides. And third, supportive friendships are forming. The same results are true of training prison inmates to tutor other inmates.

The literacy council is also partnering with the county Employment Development Department, local high schools, and Mercy Learning Center (ESL) to recruit and serve students in these special populations. Usually, the council trains tutors, assists with intake of first time students, assigns a curriculum committee member as that project's contact, and provides access to council facilities, including the library and computer lab. The community agency generally supplies a full-time coordinator, recruits students and tutors, provides most materials and supplies, and arranges a location where pairs meet for tutoring.

Community partnerships such as these tie specific problems like unemployment, abusive and addictive behaviors, poverty, crime, and excessive high school drop-out rates directly to the fundamental problem of deficient literacy skills. This strategy has created new opportunities for outreach from within the areas we outsiders were never able to enter.



This housing unit is part of a four-plex furnished by the Kern County Housing Authority to be used as a classroom in a low-income, high-crime section of Bakersfield, California.

A New Reader Leads the Way to Recruit Students

by **Shirley Boyd**, Director of Volunteer Services with **Frankie Scott**, New Reader/Public Speaker, Greater Gulf Literacy Council, Mobile, Alabama

Any business owner knows that there is no better salesperson than a satisfied customer. The Greater Gulf Literacy Council has a strong example. Student Frankie Scott has worked with program staff to become an enthusiastic recruiter and speaker for her literacy program. Program administrator Shirley Boyd tells the story:

It was during my time as a VISTA volunteer, working at the Greater Gulf Literacy Council in Mobile, Alabama, that I met Frankie Scott. Little did I know that one day we would work together to recruit new students to the program.

Frankie's story begins in 1991. She says, "It was a hot, muggy August day. The TV was on. My attention was drawn to a public service announcement showing a handsome young black man being taught to read by an older woman." Frankie had been thinking of trying to get help with her reading for a long time. She wondered, "Do you suppose someone could teach me to read? After all, I'm 61 years old."

Frankie called the ad's phone number for the Greater Gulf Literacy Council. She recalls, "The person who answered was Shirley Boyd. She told me that she could find a tutor to help me. As the time of my appointment drew near, I got more and more excited thinking of what the future would hold for me."

During Frankie's appointment, I called a tutor whose student had just left the program and asked her if she would be willing to start with a new student. They set up their first meeting. Then Frankie hugged me — and cried!

Frankie says, "That future I wondered about has brought so much good into my life that I want to tell the world about it. My tutor, Joan-Marie Elam, is in charge of the speakers bureau. She has taken me with her many times to speak to church groups, civic organizations, men's and women's groups. The literacy council even gets calls requesting us — we are known as 'Frankie & Joanie.'"

Frankie admits, "At first, I was nervous and embarrassed to tell perfect strangers that I couldn't read. But I knew that by telling my story, others who needed a tutor would be more inclined to come forward and admit that they couldn't read."

Frankie seeks every opportunity to meet with people in the community. On her own, she arranges speaking

engagements and sets up appointments to talk to the TV and newspaper media, program directors, CEOs of corporations, church members, and others. She calls me and says, "Shirley, I made an appointment for Thursday to talk with a group at a church. Can you go with me?" She is the Greater Gulf Literacy Council's best emissary.

You might say that Frankie and I have advanced together. In 1992, I was hired permanently as the Council's Director of Volunteer Services. The following year, Frankie

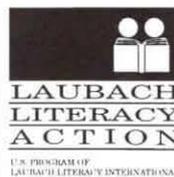
was chosen as one of three delegates to represent the state of Alabama at the National Adult Literacy Congress in Washington, D.C. She came back with so many ideas and even more enthusiasm than she had before, so that she is now unstoppable in her efforts to spread the idea of adults learning to read.

As Frankie says, "So many doors have been opened for me since I learned to read. I want everyone to know that the same can happen to them if they just contact their local literacy program and learn to read."



At the Greater Gulf Literacy Council in Mobile, Alabama, Shirley Boyd confers with Frankie Scott on plans for student and literacy council activities.

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