



If You Build It, They Will Come. Think Again.

Results of a Market Research Project on Student Recruitment in Adult Education and Literacy

Introduction

In recent years, there has been a growing emphasis in adult education and literacy to pursue outcomes-based programming. However, when it comes to student recruitment many adult education programs don't engage in a market research approach to inform their community outreach and recruitment efforts. Nationally, adult education programs are only serving approximately 10% of the population in need, so a strong case can be made that information dissemination and student recruitment should be a priority.

Market research is the act of gathering information about supporters' preferences. With modest investments, adult educators can employ some of the same target marketing strategies commonly used in other industries. The resulting data can shed light on the intentions, motivations, and behaviors of those you are trying to reach.

In 2019, the Florida Literacy Coalition conducted a series of three adult learner focus groups to explore key messages, terminology, and communication methods that may be more or less effective in recruiting students for adult education programs. All of the participants were enrolled in an ABE or adult literacy program and represented a range of individuals in terms of age, gender, and education level. ESOL students were not included. Using a customer service-based approach, we inquired about the motivations, concerns, and assumptions that factored into student decision making, and sought students' advice on how to effectively reach others in need of adult education services.

Motivation

Participating students were asked about what initially motivated them to enroll in their program. The responses ranged from wanting to learn how to "write sentences and paragraphs" to individuals pursuing specific college degrees and professions. Responses relating to pursuing post-secondary credentials and/or careers were most frequently mentioned. That said, it's worth noting that 42% of students didn't mention these as primary motivators. Themes relating to self-fulfillment, personal pride, bettering oneself, and completing something that went unfinished, were commonly mentioned. A number of students talked about how they were focusing their energies on getting their GED and didn't have definite plans beyond that. Adult Literacy League students, who were receiving literacy instruction, were more likely to mention skills development in the areas of reading, writing, and math.

"Sometimes at my age, you don't complete things that you start. And so you just go on with life and you just let it happen. But in the back of your head it's always there that you didn't complete that one

thing. And this was the one thing that I knew that I needed to do to feel complete. Closure.”

Hillsborough Community College Student

Concerns and Apprehensions

Students were asked if they had concerns or apprehensions before enrolling in the program, and the high majority indicated that they did. Many expressed anxieties about not knowing what to expect or whether they were a good fit for the program. The questions and concerns included:

- Have I been out of school too long?
- What are the required qualifications?
- Am I too old?
- It’s a college, so I was concerned about expectations.
- Is this really the right place for me?
- I may not be able to keep up.
- I don’t know what to expect.
- Fear of failure.

Adult education providers would be well advised to talk with their students about any fears, apprehensions, or assumptions they may experience in order to address how these may be mitigated and addressed for others with similar concerns. Adult educators, often working with individuals who didn’t experience much academic success as children, should be especially sensitive to these themes. These questions and issues can often be effectively addressed from the onset through transparent information sharing.

Student comments included:

“I had concerns with what were the qualifications? Was I too old, because so many advertisements I had seen before you tap out at 26 or something like that. Was I already past the mark?”

“I’ll be honest. When I first came, I was intimidated. Hell, I’m still intimidated in some of my classes. It is intimidating, but I know I have to do the work. So what they’re telling me, ‘Yeah, I’m going to get it.’ I still have to go home and bust my behind and make sure that it actually happens.”

“I was nervous about the environment at first because it was completely different than any school I’ve been to. And it ended up being okay. I mean, everyone is there to learn. Everyone is there to get their GED and try their hardest. So I really appreciate that. It’s a lot different than high school.”

Learning About the Program

Adult learners were asked how they heard about their programs, and for their recommendations on how get the word out to prospective students. Word of mouth was often referenced, especially with the community college students. It was common that participants had friends or family members who attended the college in some capacity. That said, college programs would probably be well served to make sure students throughout their campuses are aware of their adult education offerings.

Almost all participants agreed that they had seeds planted in their minds prior to actually signing up. Most of them actively searched rather than stumbled upon the program or randomly saw an advertisement. Almost all participants indicated that they had been thinking about going back to school for a while. That said, there was consensus that a well-placed ad, sign, or other promotion can help trigger action. The following tools and methods were recommended by students:

- **Social Media** – Many adult learners recommended social media as an effective way to reach potential students, and this was particularly true with students in their teens and twenties. Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram were all mentioned. Several younger students mentioned that they use Instagram with much more frequency than Facebook, which they associate with older people. They also recommended internet pop-up ads and videos via YouTube.
- **Signs:** Billboards, posters, and signs at bus stops or other public places.
- **Newspapers/TV/Radio** – No one mentioned newspapers. Only a few mentioned TV and radio.

The high majority of adult learners indicated that they have access to and regularly use the **Internet**. The exception to this included several older Adult Literacy League students. The Internet is commonly used to search for information, and many did seek out information about adult education programs online prior to enrollment.

It's important that adult education and literacy programs show up on the first page of internet searches, particularly Google. When asked for common search terms that may be used, participants shared the following:

- Closest place to get my GED
- Adult literacy
- Learn to read
- Ways to get my diploma
- GED programs near me
- GED schools near me
- Adult GED

It should be acknowledged that adult education programs located in larger institutions, such as school districts and state/community colleges, often have challenges finding ways to make it easy for people to navigate to their program web pages from the larger organization's home page. One way to address this is to work with your website manager to engage in search engine optimization strategies that allow people to link directly to your program information when doing keyword searches on Google or other search engines.

Terminology – Finding the Right Words

Focus group participants were asked for their reactions to some specific terms often used in adult education.

“Adult Basic Education” - A key take-away from this project is the fact that most students had a negative reaction to this term commonly used in our field. Some students associated the word “basic” with low quality, and others indicated that the word was potentially offensive.

Comments included:

- “So basic says that I’m giving you the shorthand version.”
- “That is like we’re getting the basic, like the bare minimum.”
- “Basic education sounds like you’re minimizing it.”
- “Basic, you should already know it. So when I’m reading that I feel insulted.”
- “I don’t feel it’s basic. For me anyway, it’s been a long time since I’ve been in school, so it wouldn’t be basic for me.”
- “Nobody is going to take that seriously. If you’re having a conversation with someone and you say, “Oh, I’m in adult basic education.”

It should be noted that this term didn’t generally elicit negative responses from Adult Literacy League students. One commented, “If I was reading that, Adult Basic Education, it means it’s a little baby step. It’s not strong. It means you won’t back away from it. ‘OK, maybe this is where I fit in. I need basic and then I can go from there.’”

“Literacy” This term generally received a favorable response. People associated it with reading, writing, learning, and understanding. One student said, “I’ve heard the word literacy and it’s always been a positive comment afterwards. It’s always like making someone better learning to do this or learning to do that.”

Two community college students indicated that it could be interpreted as insulting, for example “If you’re saying that a person is literate or illiterate, they can misinterpret it.” This was the minority viewpoint at the community colleges, and no one at the Adult Literacy League expressed reservations about the term. They agreed that it was a good term to use for the type of program in which they were enrolled.

There was a mixed reaction to the term **“Learn to Read”** with students generally preferring alternatives such as **“Working on improving your reading skills.”** **“Continuing education”** was also favorably received.

College and Career Readiness received a generally favorable response from most students. One participant noted, “Any time you throw the word “college” in front of anything, it’s going to be a positive. Like it’s an important thing for you.” An older Adult Literacy League student expressed misgivings about the term, saying, “I think that’s going to leave [out] people like me and Thomas. I don’t go for either one of those because we can’t jump into stuff like that. We need some lower stuff first.”

A majority of students expressed preference for the term **diploma** or **high school diploma** over **GED**. As one student shared, “I’ll call it my diploma when I get it.”

Slogans

Students were asked to respond to a number of slogans used by adult education and literacy programs. They were asked to identify their first and second most preferred slogans and the one that they liked least. Themes connected with receiving a second chance and that it’s never too late to learn tended to especially resonate with adult learners.

Slogan	1st	2nd	Last
It's Never Too Late to Learn	8	1	
A Second Chance to Get Your Education	4	6	
Adult Education – A Pathway to Career Success	4	5	
Literacy Works- Sharing Knowledge, Transforming Lives	3	2	4
Read to Succeed	1	1	
GED, Yes You Can		1	4
Learn More, Earn More			4
Read, Empower, Succeed	2	2	7
Families that Learn Together Grow Together			6

Student Testimonials

Participants had a very positive reaction to the use of student stories and testimonials. This was true as both a general concept, as well as in reaction to a [video](#) they were shown that featured Gail, an adult learner from DePorres Place. Students described Gail as authentic, real, honest, and inspiring. They shared that hearing from successful students in their own words can be very motivating, and videos featured on program websites and YouTube can be a great way to motivate students.

Several students mentioned that they liked Gail's acknowledgment that learning can be difficult, but you need to persevere. One noted, "At the very beginning you have some fears about this whole thing. If you had seen a video like that – would that say, 'Hey, if she does it, maybe I can do this.'"

It also seemed to resonate that she is older and that she has 'walked the walk.' As one student said, "You can't tell me if you ain't ever been there."

Website Design and Navigation

Several different websites were reviewed and students were asked for feedback and recommendations on what works well and should be included in an effective website.

1. Websites should be easy to read, understand, and navigate. “I like the way they have it broken down into paragraphs. Not a whole lot to read at one time,” shared one student.
2. Share cost, program location, services offered.
3. When possible, information should be no more than two or three “clicks” down.
4. Students like photos and responded favorably to both graduate (cap and gown) images and photos of students and instructors in classrooms and tutoring sessions. Several mentioned the importance of using authentic photos from real programs and not stock images.
5. Consider including FAQs, and introductory videos. Address issues that may cause potential concerns or doubts.
6. Telephone was the preferred mode of initial contact. Don’t have an online inquiry form requiring personal information.

Participants were shown a variety of website menu terms pointing to information for prospective students. They tended to prefer terms such as “**Programs**” or “**Classes**” as opposed to “Learn More,” “Students,” or “Adult Learners”.

Most students had a favorable reaction to a [video](#) from Literacy Pittsburgh that provides information on their program and how to enroll. In FLC’s review of adult education websites from around the country, it appears that this approach isn’t commonly used but has the potential to connect and communicate with prospective students in ways difficult by using text alone. In comparing a text-based website to the Pittsburg information video, one Adult Literacy League student noted “The video one is better if you cannot read” explaining that the other website has good information “But if you can’t read it, it does me no good.”

Closing Thoughts

While this pilot project was limited in scope, we hope this whitepaper has provided useful insights and made the case that adult education and literacy providers can employ a data-driven approach to student recruitment and marketing. Engage your students in developing your marketing plan. They are the experts. With their assistance and the use of relatively simple market research strategies, adult education providers can effectively target resources to meet learner expectations and help ensure that all those in need are aware of your programs and what you have to offer.

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