



Research Bulletin on Marketing Success Stories in LBS



info@communityliteracyofontario.ca



communityliteracyofontario.ca



(705) 733-2312



@CommunityLiteracyOntario



@love4literacy

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Introduction

As part of its 2022-2023 business plan deliverables, Community Literacy of Ontario researched innovative approaches to marketing in Literacy and Basic Skills programs.

We are happy to share the following five marketing success stories:

1. **Targeted Marketing – A Sales Pitch with Purpose and Passion** (Community Learning Alternatives)
2. **The Big Pivot – An Innovative Preparation for Pre-Apprenticeship Partnership Model for Level 1 and 2 Adult Learners** (Project READ Literacy Network)
3. **Dynamic Rural Partnerships to Support Adult Education** (Prince Edward Learning Centre)
4. **A Social Enterprise for Profit, Purpose, People, and Promotion!** (Gateway Centre for Learning)
5. **A Big Adventure in Branding and Intentional Marketing!** (Spark Employment Services)





Targeted Marketing – A Sales Pitch with Purpose & Passion

COMMUNITY LEARNING ALTERNATIVES

Thank you, Shannon Lee, Executive Director of **Community Learning Alternatives (CLA)**, for sharing this impactful marketing story with us! CLA is a community-based Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) agency serving the Belleville, Trenton and Madoc area.

OVERVIEW OF CLA'S MARKETING STRATEGY

Rather than using a generalized marketing approach to learner recruitment, Community Learning Alternatives decided to implement a strategic and targeted approach to marketing. CLA identified its most important referral partners and created targeted material to promote its LBS programming to these partners in relevant ways. They also focused on making in-person connections with referral partners to rebuild relationships in the post-COVID era.



WHY THIS MARKETING STRATEGY WAS DEVELOPED

Community Learning Alternatives implemented this marketing approach because their current ways of marketing

were not effective in engaging community partners to refer learners. The breadth of services offered by many LBS community-based agencies is often very wide. CLA realized that their marketing messages were too broad and generalized and could sometimes be confusing. To solve this issue, Shannon and her team decided to instead use a targeted marketing approach to recruit learners. We now live in a “sound bite” world and less is often more in marketing. CLA realized that targeted messages are typically more impactful than generalized ones.

CLA also believed that a personal connection was needed to successfully engage referral partners. For this task, CLA found that Facebook or email campaigns and online meetings do not work very well. They determined that in the post pandemic world, building personal connections in the community were what was needed.

TARGET GROUP

The main target group for Community Learning Alternative's marketing strategy were its two key referral partners: Ontario Works (OW) and Employment Service (ES).

Their secondary target audience were other organizations that link with and support LBS clients, such as other LBS providers, the

Enrichment Centre for Mental Health, John Howard Society, Addiction Services, the Chamber of Commerce, Libraries, and other community partners.

IMPLEMENTATION

Community Learning Alternatives was not getting enough referrals to **Next Steps**, their employment readiness program. So, CLA decided to change up their marketing, and they personally reached out to staff at Ontario Works and Employment Services. They did an impactful in-person explanation of the Next Steps program, and its benefits to OW and ES clients and this approach resulted in referrals.



Based on this success, Shannon & her team then decided to take two important steps.

1. Step One: Engage in Targeted Marketing

CLA applied a targeted and personalized approach to their marketing by taking the following steps:

- CLA assessed who their top referral partners were. In CLA's case, their top partners were Ontario Works and Employment Services.

- CLA then strategically reviewed what the top goals and needs of their two partners were.

- They cross-referenced learner needs and CLA programming with partner needs. CLA asked themselves, "What is the most important issue or need facing this referral partner?"

- In short, CLA wanted to engage in marketing that sent the following message to referral partners: "We understand your goals and here's how we can help you."

- CLA then created highly specific promotional material based on the above factors. For example, they promoted their pre-PSW preparation curriculum and the Next Steps programming to Employment Services, since their main goal is employment.

- CLA created brochures specific to each program they were offering. They then delivered these brochures in-person to their top partners and shared the benefits of that particular program. They also created a program guide for referral partners that shared all programming offered by CLA.

- CLA deliberately went "old school" – and developed in-person connections and paper-based brochures. They needed to get their partners to really see and understand what CLA could do for their clients and build relationships. With the high level of staff turnover at partner agencies, the paper-based brochures and program guides remained onsite after staff turnover occurred.

- Their marketing materials were also sent

out via email, but materials were mainly shared in-person since it was personalized relationships that CLA was seeking to build.

- This targeted and specific programming resonated with their partners and CLA was able to get its “foot in the door.” CLA could then promote other program offerings.
- While CLA focused on its two main partners, they also made intentional connections & shared marketing materials with secondary community partners as well.
- CLA worked hard to position itself as a “go to” agency in the community which could be counted on to deliver important and successful programming to clients.

2. Step Two: Enhance In-Person Connections with Key Partners

The staff of Community Learning Alternatives realized they needed to connect in person with staff from referral partners to build stronger referral relationships in the post-pandemic world. During the pandemic there had been much staff turnover amongst referral partners, along with a significant disconnect due to the shift to online service delivery. Online methods such as email, Facebook, and virtual meetings were not working well. CLA decided it was time to reach out in person to help partners to truly understand what CLA could offer clients.

CLA used a “whole organization” approach. They decided these connections were far too important to leave to just one staff person. Instead, all CLA staff were invested in making these intentional community connections. Staff had various linkages with

partner organizations (some connected with frontline workers and others with supervisors, for example). Their Board Chair and other volunteers also leveraged their connections. CLA’s philosophy was to focus on relationship building with the most important partners (OW and ES) but that any opportunity to connect with community partners was important. CLA didn’t formally train staff in this new approach, but rather embedded it in existing operations. Via regular staff meetings and discussions, they set the path for intentional connections to be made by all staff with key referral partners. Community Learning Alternatives had basic talking points to promote their agency to their partners, based on stakeholder needs. Essentially, they sought to get the message across that “Your client is my learner. We can help them succeed together.”

CLA knew that if they could find the right people in each organization who could be champions of the programming offered by their agency, that referrals would be much easier. For example, CLA connected with a champion at a rural Ontario Works office. After connecting in person and explaining their program, this OW staff person referred 7 people to CLA’s Next Steps program!



Shannon and her team also believe that it is important to nurture relationships by staying connected and sharing information with partners on an ongoing basis.

FUNDING



Community Learning Alternatives financed this strategy through its core budget from the Ontario Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development.

This strategy required staff to adjust their existing marketing strategies as new strategies were created and old ones discontinued. Some new brochures and a program guide were made, but those costs were absorbed in-house as some CLA staff have graphic design skills and use free design tools such as Canva.

The main resource required for this strategy was the intentional use of staff time towards strategic marketing, rather than general marketing.

CHALLENGES

Community Learning Alternatives experienced the following challenges:

- CLA has much to offer and provides many great services. Forcing themselves to showcase one or two program offerings was challenging and required thoughtfulness and a measure of discipline.

- An attitudinal shift towards a different way of marketing can be difficult and required time and practice to adjust to.
- There was a big turnover of staff within CLA's referral partners during COVID. Considerable effort needed to be made to build relationships with a wide variety of new staff and time was required to educate new staff about LBS and CLA programs. This role was time consuming upfront, but it worked!
- Some partners continued to offer mainly (or only) online services even when most organizations and business opened their doors to the public. This made connecting with real people and building a warm relationship for referrals and connections more difficult.
- When work became extra demanding, there was a tendency to temporarily bump relationship building with referral partners down the list of priorities.

ADVICE TO OTHER LBS PROGRAMS

Community Learning Alternatives shared the following advice to other LBS programs seeking to use a similar marketing strategy:

- Take the time to develop a targeted marketing strategy that works for **YOUR** LBS agency. Consider the following issues and develop your strategy around the answers to these questions:
 - » Who are your most important referral partners?
 - » What are their main goals and needs?
 - » What programming does your agency

offer that meets the needs of these referral partners?

- » What are the key needs of your learners?
 - » Where do these issues intersect for the benefit of all?
 - » What programming and messaging is most likely to reach your key partners?
- Pitch a specific program to your referral partners based on needs of their clients. It could be a different program for each partner.
 - Once you have initial buy-in for a specific program, this leads to buy-in for your agency as a whole! When you get your foot in the door with one “win,” the referral partners will often be interested in referring their clients to more of your programs.
 - Involve all staff in intentional relationship building with key partners.
 - When training staff to build their own connections, plan out the key talking points to promote your agency. Less is more. Focus on your most relevant programming for the particular needs for your referral partners.
 - Share feedback and testimonials from learners with referral partners. Learner stories are impactful and greatly help with by-in.
 - Promote targeted training opportunities rather than generalized learning to your referral partners. They are often the most popular programming with partners. Targeted training has clear start and

end dates and a set curriculum. This programming is easily understandable and clear to partners.

- Take the time to say thanks to your partners and remind them that what they do is important. Their work matters and helps vulnerable people.
- Share knowledge and resources with other LBS programs to learn what’s working and what’s not. Attend regional literacy network meetings and reach out to others. Share via CLO. Share on social media. **You’re not in this alone!**



It’s a sales pitch! You need to have your passion and message shine through when pitching your program to your partners.”

- Shannon Lee





The Big Pivot – An Innovative Preparation For Pre-Apprenticeship Partnership Model For Level 1 & 2 Adult Learners

PROJECT READ LITERACY NETWORK

Thanks to Jane Tuer, Executive Director of **Project READ Literacy Network (PRLN)**, for telling us about this dynamic partnership & marketing opportunity. PRLN is a regional literacy network serving the Waterloo-Wellington region.

OVERVIEW

In 2022, as part of the Skills for Success initiative, the Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development (MLITSD) required all regional literacy networks to set up apprenticeship committees made up of Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) providers in their region. Project READ’s apprenticeship committee worked extremely well together and developed a unique idea. They knew that there was a great need for more apprentices. The committee also knew that many level 1 and 2 learners are interested in apprenticeships but that they often lack the academic skills to succeed.

The committee envisioned a new initiative that would address these needs. They suggested creating a partnership between a community-based LBS agency (serving level 1 learners) and a school board program (serving level 2 learners) to support these learners to gain the skills to participate in an existing program at Conestoga College called Women in Skilled Trades (WIST) General Carpenter Pre-Apprenticeship.

The committee then brought their idea to the Literacy Services Planning Committee who gave further input and support. Project READ then applied for (and received) funding for this project under MLITSD’s Skills for Success funding in its 2023/24 Business Plan. This project will be implemented starting in April 2023.

WHY THIS INITIATIVE WAS DEVELOPED

The WIST program has been popular and was typically fully subscribed; however, some LBS learners wanted to take the WIST program but lacked the academic skills to do so. Locally, there was a high demand for these sorts of skilled tradespeople. The committee believed that a partnership model using the expertise of several LBS agencies, who were experienced with supporting learners at levels 1 and 2, was the best way to meet this need.

Further, Project READ’s apprenticeship committee realized that this type of preparation for pre-apprenticeship programming had a strong potential to attract many new learners. For many learners, there is less stigma attached to attending a college program than an adult learning centre. And, reducing stigma is the key to attracting new learners to LBS programming. Many LBS agencies struggle to attract enough learners, and Proj-

ect READ and its partners believed that LBS agencies providing fresh, dynamic, skilled-based training initiatives would be an excellent marketing opportunity.

TARGET GROUP

The primary target group for this initiative is women who are interested in pre-apprenticeship training in general carpentry and who have been assessed at LBS levels 1 or 2. Project READ is delighted to participate in encouraging more women to enter apprenticeship programming!

IMPLEMENTATION

Implementation of this preparation for pre-apprenticeship initiative will commence in April 2023. However, solid planning has already begun for this innovative project.

Implementation plans include:

- Project READ plans to set up a preparation for pre-apprenticeship partnership initiative to support levels 1 and 2 learners to become ready to take Conestoga College's Women in Skilled Trades – General Carpenter program.
- This training will be delivered through a seamless model at Conestoga College, with three LBS partners:
 - » Serving Level 1 Learners – Community-based LBS program
 - » Serving Level 2 Learners – School Board LBS Program
 - » Serving Level 3 Learners – Conestoga College's Women in Skilled Trades (WIST) General Carpenter Pre-Apprenticeship program.

- This model of delivery will allow learners to go through all three levels of apprenticeship preparation in one location instead of having to move between different cities or building locations for the three steps.
- This would be a safe and non-threatening way for vulnerable adult learners with low academic skill levels to enter the apprenticeship system in a supported manner.
- This process would reduce the stigma of attending a literacy program since all LBS classroom instruction will occur at Conestoga College.
- Project READ has also requested funding for honourariums for guest speakers. Guest speakers are key to engaging low level learners. They will bring in women who have succeeded in the field of carpentry as guest speakers to motivate and encourage the learners.
- As part of this initiative, Project READ will create curriculum for level 1 and 2 learners for the WIST program and will also develop milestones and culminating tasks. They plan to create a curriculum package that can later be used by LBS providers in other regions of Ontario.
- Project READ will also track and evaluate successes and challenges that occur during the implementation of this initiative. They plan to share these learnings so that other LBS agencies across Ontario can benefit. Project READ sees this as an excellent model for other regions and for other apprenticeship topics and target groups.

FUNDING

Project READ has applied for (and received) MLITSD's Skills for Success funding for this project under its Business Plan for the 2023-24 fiscal year. This funding would cover:

- Instructor costs for the program
- Staffing costs for developing curriculum for level 1 and 2 learners
- Honourariums for guest speakers
- Materials
- Evaluation

Conestoga College will provide the classroom space free of charge.

Project READ and its partners are seeking to create a course and process that should be sustainable for LBS agencies to run with their existing core funding in the future. The curricula developed will be available to all LBS agencies in the region and throughout the province.

CHALLENGES

- Adult learners often lack self-confidence & may find attending a college program intimidating. They need a great deal of support and encouragement that must be built into the programming.
- Partnerships take time, effort, mutual commitment, and trust to develop; they never just happen. Once again, time needs to be built into this function.
- Project READ's initiative is a new way of offering programming and there aren't existing models to build on. This made their initiative both interesting & exciting.

However, it would have made development easier if they had other examples to build on.

- One of the biggest challenges is negative attitudes towards apprenticeship. Unfortunately, the attitude still exists that high achieving people go to university and that apprenticeship and applied learning is for those who are less accomplished.



Adult learners with low academic skill levels need a safe, non-threatening way to enter pre-apprenticeship programming where they can be supported to succeed."

- Jane Tuer

ADVICE TO OTHER LBS PROGRAMS

Project READ shared the following advice to other LBS programs:

- Bring the strengths of various LBS agencies and other stakeholders together so you can build on the knowledge, skills, and connections of a group. Via their apprenticeship committee, Project READ gained a bigger perspective, innovative ideas, new connections, and a brilliant solution to supporting level 1 and 2 learners to engage in pre-apprenticeship programming.
- Stand back and look at your community. Look at the big picture. What are the barriers truly holding back potential learners from engaging in LBS programs? And then, brainstorm ways to overcome those barriers.
- Develop a clear plan and create a logic model! Plan it before you start building it

and assess partner roles, goals, timelines, and budget.

- Respect your partners and build on each other’s strengths. Everyone brings unique strengths to a partnership initiative.
- It is easier to work on a tangible, specific and clear goal than on a generalized

initiative with a broad focus. For example, Project READ and the team were working to enhance and expand a pre-existing pre-apprenticeship program at a college.

- Clearly define your target audience & focus on their needs and concerns. Don’t try to be all things to all people.... keep your focus.



Dynamic Rural Partnerships to Support Adult Education

PRINCE EDWARD LEARNING CENTRE

Thank you to Jennifer Hunter, Essential Skills Coordinator at Prince Edward Learning Centre (PELC), for contributing this inspiring and creative approach! PELC is a community-based Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) agency serving Prince Edward County.

- Loyola School of Adult and Continuing Education
- Quinte Adult Education
- Contact North

OVERVIEW

Prince Edward County is a large, rural geographic area, where a lack of services and transportation challenges are issues. This means that partnerships are the norm for delivering services.

Prince Edward Learning Centre is co-located with a number of educational partners and has developed unique ways to support adult education in PELC.

These partners are:



IMPLEMENTATION

School Board Partnership

PELC is co-located with the Loyola School of Adult and Continuing Education which is part of the Algonquin Lakeshore Catholic

School Board. Both Loyola and Quinte Adult Education (which is part of the Hastings Prince Edward District School Board) offer high school credits via online delivery.

Online delivery can result in registration being a barrier for adult learners. Accordingly, PELC whenever needed, supports intake and registration services for adults seeking to enter high school credit programming. Registration is a complicated process and learners typically require support to do so, particularly when delivery is online.

PELC provides help in many practical ways. For example, they can help learners to locate high school transcripts in order to register for credit programs, assist learners to access computers and internet services, and help learners to log on to their online classes.

Understandably, many learners want to get their high school credits as soon as possible. Some learners are simply not ready academically and will first need LBS instruction from PELC prior to engaging in school board programming. Assisting with registration helps develop relationships with the learner, as all providers work together to meet learners needs, sometimes resulting in concurrent LBS service and high school credit delivery. The number of learners attending adult education programming has increased so it's a win-win situation for everyone involved.

Contact North Partnership

Contact North has recently co-located to Prince Edward Learning Centre. In addition to offering a wide variety of adult learning opportunities online, Contact North also offers LBS learning opportunities online via eChannel. This partnership increases

the number and scope of adult education opportunities available in Prince Edward County.

WHY THIS INITIATIVE WAS DEVELOPED

In rural communities, there are fewer services and large geographic areas must be served with often limited access to transportation. Collaborating and sharing resources to meet the needs of adults seeking to upgrade their skills is the most effective approach.

PELC's adult education partners provide adult education services mainly online. Accordingly, PELC decided that it was important to develop partnerships to support learners to attend the programming that best meets their needs. This approach has led to an increase in people engaging in adult education opportunities for all partners, it is a win-win situation for everyone.

TARGET GROUP

The target group for this initiative is:

- Ontario Works and ODSP clients
- People in vulnerable situations (people living in poverty, women, and under-represented groups)
- People with mental health issues and anxiety who need extra support to engage in learning



CHALLENGES

Community Learning Alternatives experienced the following challenges:

- Many people want to earn high school credits right away even if they do not yet have the necessary skills. After assessment it can be discouraging for learners to have to do regular LBS learning prior to going on to the school board credit program.
- It takes ongoing effort to promote the value of their program to adult education partners and other community stakeholders.
- It requires time, effort and nurturing to build partnerships. You need to think creatively and keep working at it. Finding the time and energy can be challenging at times.

ADVICE TO OTHER LBS PROGRAMS

PELC offers the following advice to other LBS programs:

- Don't be afraid to actively promote your LBS agency boldly. Community-based LBS agencies are part of the adult education and training system and have much to offer their communities!
- Keep your focus on learner needs and reach out and create awesome partnerships where they are needed.
- Don't wait for partners to come looking for you. You need to reach out and pitch yourself.

- Remember that building partnerships and engaging in community outreach and promotion is an ongoing role that will take time and focus.

- In order to support learners, there is a continual necessity to use your creativity and connections to find community solutions. Keep focused on finding solutions via a variety of partnerships and it will pay off.



We jumped right in and created a variety of partnerships to help the learners. We are trying to build a team to support each learner! Everyone needs their own mix of supports and we just have to figure out what that is.”

- Jennifer Hunter

OTHER

PELC also offers several key programs that provide important support to vulnerable learners. These programs also indirectly support their marketing efforts and result in increased learner enrollment at PELC, awareness of the learning centre in the community, and in opportunities for partnership development.

These programs include:

The Market Program

- Supports food security by providing a weekly market with fresh fruit and vegetables

- Provides employment readiness training for learners who work at the market to develop their skills

Financial Empowerment Program

- Offers financial literacy training & support
- Conducts a review of the government benefits people are entitled to receive
- Links learners with existing support programs such as the Ontario Energy Support Program

Civic Literacy

- Based on learner needs and interests, engages in group learning and activities related to civic literacy and awareness
- Hosts a Community Garden
- Encourages children to read via County Kids Read and Reading Round-Up

Free Tax Clinics

- Provides the Community Volunteer Income Tax Program



A Social Enterprise for Profit, Purpose, People, & Promotion!

GAREWAY CENTRE FOR LEARNING

Thank you to Jennifer Ellis, Executive Director of **Gateway Centre for Learning** for telling us about this innovative approach to marketing! Gateway is a community-based Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) agency serving Midland and area.

OVERVIEW

The primary target group for this initiative is women who are interested in pre-apprenticeship training in general carpentry and who have been assessed at LBS levels 1 or 2. Project READ is delighted to participate

in encouraging more women to enter apprenticeship programming!

IMPLEMENTATION

Bookmark Used Books was set up over 10 years ago. Thanks to a Trillium Foundation grant as part of a project hosted by Laubach Literacy Ontario, Gateway was able to explore three different types of social enterprises. In the end, only the bookstore was financially sustainable, and it had the added benefit of linking closely with Gateway's mission.

Bookmark Used Books is located right next door to Gateway Centre for Learning. It operates on a donation model where individuals and groups donate used books for resale. The bookstore contains a great variety of books with thousands of titles available at low prices for book lovers of all ages. The bookstore is open Monday to Saturday from 10:00 am to 4:00 pm.

Bookmark Used Books is 90% volunteer run. Staff oversee operations and a group of 15 volunteers operate the bookstore. These volunteers are incredibly devoted to supporting the bookstore and promoting it in the community. As well, some of these volunteers get involved as tutors or in office administration in Gateway's adult literacy program.

Approximately \$20,000 is raised annually from the bookstore's operations. Gateway engages in other fundraising activities and none of their other fundraisers come close to raising this level of revenue.

The bookstore also provides the opportunity for interested learners to gain employment experience by volunteering to attain skills such as customer service, administration, and retail. The learners can also receive an employment reference for their volunteer work.

Bookmark Used Books and Marketing

The main goal of Bookmark Used Books is to increase revenue for the adult literacy services provided by Gateway; however, Gateway soon noticed that the bookstore also assisted with marketing.

Here are some of the ways that Bookmark Used Books supports Gateway's marketing efforts:

- More awareness of Gateway's services was generated by people who came to the bookstore to purchase or to donate books. This assisted with learner recruitment, community awareness, and partnership development. Word of mouth is still the prime way to recruit learners, and operating a popular bookstore provides a great opportunity to continually engage with a variety of people.
- Community members heard about the bookstore and wanted to help. An incredibly dynamic, hardworking, and passionate group of volunteers now operate Bookmark Used Books, assist with Gateway's programming, or serve on their Board of Directors.
- Gateway offers high school students the chance to gain their volunteer hours at the bookstore. This has resulted in parents, other family members, etc. referring people to the learning centre.
- Many adult learners value the chance to get involved in experiential learning at the bookstore and this feature helps Gateway retain them in the literacy program.
- Both Gateway and the bookstore are showcased at community events. This co-promotion makes it easier to engage a variety of people with diverse interests.
- On occasion, Gateway brings boxes of books to retirement homes and sometimes younger family members then engage with LBS programming or other services.

- All staff and volunteers are trained and ready to promote Gateway Centre for Learning to people at the bookstore. As noted by Jennifer Ellis, “No matter where we go, we’re giving a sales pitch to promote Gateway!”
- Gateway promotes their bookstore on social media. Their most active platforms are Facebook and Instagram. For branding and for efficiency, they market Gateway and Bookmark Used Books on the same accounts. They clearly brand each post to increase community awareness of both entities and Gateway creates compelling images in order to project a professional image.

Be sure to visit these websites for more information:

- Gateway Centre for Learning: <http://www.gatewaycentreforlearning.ca>
- Bookmark Used Books: <http://www.gatewaycentreforlearning.ca/bookmark>
- Gateway’s Facebook Page: <https://www.facebook.com/GatewayCentreForLearningMidland>
- Gateway’s Instagram Account: <https://www.instagram.com/bookmarkusedbooks>



WHY THIS INITIATIVE WAS DEVELOPED

Gateway Centre for Learning is a small charity with a big mission of delivering services to adult learners in Midland and area. It receives modest funding from the Ontario Government, from donations, and from various fundraising activities and Gateway knew it needed to increase its revenue and diversify its funding sources. Accordingly, over 10 years ago, after trying several different social enterprise initiatives, Gateway set up Bookmark Used Books.

At the time, Gateway had not considered the promotional benefits of operating a bookstore. Generating revenue had originally been the only focus. As the bookstore grew and they became more experienced with operating this small business, other benefits, such as increased marketing opportunities, became apparent.

TARGET GROUPS

The main target group for Bookmark Used Books is the general public with the intent to encourage them to buy their books. However, when you operate a social enterprise of interest to the public, you simply cannot predict who will walk through your doors and provide you with new opportunities or connections.

They have three secondary target groups:

- Gateway seeks to recruit new volunteers to work in the bookstore or in other parts of their program.
- They also work towards attracting new

learners to adult literacy programming via Gateway, and to engage learners in experiential learning opportunities at the bookstore.

- By serving as a dynamic social enterprise in the community, Gateways seeks to engage with new community partners, such as the Chamber of Commerce.

FUNDING

Start up funding for Bookmark Used Books was received from a Trillium Foundation grant. This grant covered initial capital costs, wages for start-up, and other costs such as marketing.

Since that initial grant, Gateway Centre for Learning has supported the bookstore from its core revenues. The bookstore is largely self-sufficient under the umbrella of Gateway as it is 90% run by volunteers, with staff from Gateway providing oversight. The bookstore makes a profit each year and as a social enterprise, this revenue is used by Gateway to provide services.

At times, new capital costs arise. The purchase of new display shelves is an example; however, donations and volunteer labour have met these needs. Annual revenue from the bookstore has varied and several times the Board of Directors has questioned whether it was profitable to continue; however, staff and volunteers have always rallied and found a way to keep the bookstore going. Bookmark Used Books now brings in a steady annual income of \$20,000 – which is very helpful to the mission and mandate of Gateway. As well, other benefits are provided by the bookstore in addition to the financial ones.

CHALLENGES

- Gateway experiences all the challenges inherent in running a small business! Operating the bookstore, including marketing, takes considerable time, skill, and effort.
- Gateway's volunteers are very loyal and highly motivated; however, occasionally, there may be a last-minute cancellation of a shift. As well, volunteers may leave the community resulting in the ongoing need to recruit new volunteers.
- Sometimes, Gateway receives too many books and finding storage is a challenge.
- Occasionally someone will drop off damaged books and Gateway is then responsible for destroying and disposing of these books.
- It can be a challenge to keep the shelves fresh and assess the proper turnover of stock.
- It is difficult for staff and volunteers (as non-professionals) to adequately assess the value of rare or collectible books.
- Older customers often want large print books but those can be hard to find.



What's the price of the awareness, learner and volunteer recruitment, and the experiential learning placements for learners brought to us by operating our bookstore? It's absolutely priceless!"

- Jennifer Ellis

ADVICE TO OTHER LBS PROGRAMS

Gateway Centre for Learning offered the following advice to LBS programs:

- You will need to get an initial grant to get your social enterprise started as there are many initial costs involved.
- There is a significant skill set required from staff and volunteers to run a social enterprise; be sure not to under-estimate the skill set needed. Ideally, recruit someone with business experience specific to your social enterprise for the start-up phase. After all, a social enterprise is in fact a small business with a social mission.
- The start up and ongoing operation of a social enterprise will take considerable time and effort. It does get easier over time.
- If possible, co-locate the operation of your social enterprise with your literacy centre.
- Embed marketing opportunities everywhere and in everything you do. For example, on your logo, tagline, bookbags, labels, bookmarks, and more.
- Brand your social enterprise and link it with your LBS agency so that it is recognizable in your community.
- Actively promote your social enterprise and agency on social media with engaging posts and consistent branding.



A Big Adventure in Branding and Intentional Marketing!

SPARK EMPLOYMENT SERVICES

Thank you to Ginette Comeau-Roy, Training and Skills Development Manager, and Stephanie Lagrandeur, Marketing & Communication Officer, with Spark Employment Services for sharing their marketing strategies with us! Spark Employment Services is a multi service agency providing Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) and Employment Services (ES) in the Sudbury region.

OVERVIEW

Originally, Spark Employment Services was called the Sudbury Vocational Resource Centre. The name was unclear to many and did not convey the purpose and mission of the organization. In 2019, the CEO, Board and staff decided a new name, a fresh new look, and re-branding was needed. They created a dynamic new name for their organization: Spark Employment Services. This name

change also coincided with a move to a new location.

This meant that Spark was moving to a new location, changing its name, and seeking to rebrand itself all at once. This was a tall order, but they were up for the challenge and a full relaunch of the organization occurred!

As part of the rebrand, Stephanie Lagrandeur was hired as Spark’s first-ever Marketing and Communications Coordinator. Stephanie was initially hired as an intern, but her marketing skills soon became indispensable to the organization, and a full-time position was created.

Formerly, marketing had been conducted by administrative staff as part of their regular jobs. This new targeted approach gave Spark the opportunity to implement more focused and intentional marketing.

IMPLEMENTATION

Spark Employment Services had the following goals for their branding refresh:

- To get the word out in the community about the new look, name and feel of Spark.
- To showcase the amazing benefits provided by Spark – for adult learners, job seekers, and the community.
- To designate one person to have the prime responsibility for marketing and promoting the rebrand of Spark rather than sharing this task over multiple positions. While all staff are generally engaged in the rebrand, having one person who has prime responsibility was important for brand continuity and focus.

- To use the rebranding process to have all their programs and services appear as seamless to the client. Clients do not care about program names or funding streams – they care about what services they can receive and that they can navigate the system easily. Spark engaged in “learner-centred branding.”
- To create impactful images and content for traditional and new media with a consistent look and message.
- To relaunch their social media channels to link with their new brand.



Spark Employment Services also creates an annual marketing plan:

- Spark develops a marketing plan for whole agency, including Literacy and Basic Skills, Employment Services, and other programming.
- This plan is seamless and presents all programming under one brand. Their marketing efforts share all of what Spark can do for clients in a wholistic manner.
- They engage in joint outreach at community events or in stakeholder presentations for all of Spark’s programming.
- Spark identifies trends and collects data on

optimum times to engage learners in their programming, and on which programs and services are most popular with clients. They then develop their traditional and social media marketing around these trends in order to get the best outcomes for their marketing efforts.

Since the rebrand and the development of an intentional and focused marketing strategy, there has been much more community engagement. Spark is now well-known in the Sudbury region!

To engage a broad group of stakeholders, Spark Employment Services uses a wide variety of marketing approaches, including the following:

- Program information and events are posted on their website and sent out via email and social media.
- Stakeholders can easily sign up to receive informational emails from Spark via their website.
- Sparks pays for advertisement in local magazines, radio, and billboards. They are also exploring paying for ads on city buses.
- Spark tracks connections made. They are proud to say that over the past several years, Spark has connected with 93 different organizations in the Sudbury region!
- They conduct personal outreach and presentations to referral partners, service clubs, and other stakeholders.
- Spark is active in their community. In order to increase brand awareness, they participate in community events, such as Rib Fest and the Northern Lights Festival.



Spark Employment Services uses social media as an important part of its marketing plan.

- Their most popular platforms are Facebook and Instagram. Sparks is exploring the use of TikTok, and they are also setting up a premium business account for LinkedIn.
- Spark uses targeted, paid ads on social media when appropriate.

Spark Employment Services is also looking into an exciting new client referral program. Everyone who refers a client to Spark will get a free Positive Inception t-shirt. Positive Inception is a popular local brand, and Spark has created a partnership with them to purchase these t-shirts at a reduced cost. As well, everyone who makes a referral will get a ticket for a monthly draw for a “work from home package” that includes a keyboard, mouse, and a webcam!

Spark is not afraid to try new marketing strategies and they know that trial and error are the best teachers. It will be very interesting to see what this innovative agency comes up with next!

For more information on Spark Employment Services, visit these websites:

- Spark Employment Services: <https://www.sudburyemployment.ca/>
- Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/sudburyemployment>
- Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/sparkemploymentservices/>
- TikTok: <https://www.tiktok.com/@sparkemployment>

TARGET GROUPS

Spark Employment Service’s marketing plan targets a general audience and several specific ones as well. Spark employs an all-agency marketing approach by promoting both LBS, Employment Services, and other programs to its community.

Their marketing targets the following groups:

- The community at large
- Learners
- Friends and family of potential learners
- Job seekers
- Referral agencies
- Community partners
- Employers

Social media, in particular, is sometimes segmented by audience. Via social media, Spark can target posts by geographic location, interests, and age as needed.



FUNDING

When Spark Employment Services rebranded in 2019, they received a one-year grant to fund the marketing internship position from the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corporation (NOHFC). The position was so successful that after the internship had been completed, Spark created the permanent position of Marketing and Communications Coordinator from their general revenue.

CHALLENGES

- Finding the right brand for your organization is not a simple task. It takes time and effort to develop a clear, effective, and authentic brand for your organization.
- Maintaining the funding from their core budget for the marketing position is a challenge. The position is considered “mission critical;” therefore, Spark always finds a way.
- It can be a challenge to accept that a new and seemingly brilliant marketing strategy may not work. Spark has learned to not be afraid of experimenting with new ideas. They review the results of a new approach, learn from it, and either build on it, or move on to something different.
- While community awareness of Spark has dramatically increased, it is still difficult to recruit clients. Client numbers were down due to the pandemic but are now steadily increasing. However, it remains true that it is not an easy task to recruit LBS learners.
- For social media to be effective, skill and

knowledge of the various platforms and how to create impactful content and images are needed.

- Literacy and LBS terminology are a stigma for many people.

ADVICE TO OTHER LBS PROGRAMS

Spark Employment Services offers the following advice to other LBS programs:

- Take the time to create clear, distinct, impactful, and authentic branding for your organization. This includes your name, logo, tagline, and organizational culture.
- Create unified and simple messaging about your organization. Ensure that all staff spread this one consistent message in their dealings with clients and the community.
- Build on your top marketing method and optimize it. For Spark, it is word of mouth, and they keep this in mind in all of their marketing efforts.
- Focus on your clients – because everything stems from that. Offer excellent customer service that helps change people’s lives for the better. This will lead to clients who are loyal to your organization (or to use a marketing term, they will be “brand loyal”). Happy clients spreading positive messages in your community is the most effective marketing strategy! This also shows the importance of using learner testimonials in your marketing.
- Don’t be afraid of taking calculated risks

with marketing. Trial and error are often the best way to learn, and it allows you figure out a better way going forward. As Stephanie noted, “At Spark, there have been lots of trials, so now there aren’t as many errors.”

- Be sure to engage in social media marketing. Many people will find you online before they find you in the community so being present in that space is important. However, you do not have to be present on every social media platform. Pick one (or several) that work best for your organization.
- To enhance community awareness, participate in community events – even when they are not directly related to literacy or employment.
- Try to get short-term funding to pay someone to help your organization with marketing. For example, you could hire a summer student. Marketing is a specific skill, and your organization will learn a great deal even in a limited time period. This can set you on the right path to more effective marketing.



Find what marketing strategies work best for your organization. Don't be afraid to try and fail. You'll learn a lot and do better next time. Keep at it and don't give up."

- Stephanie Lagrandeur

CONCLUSION

This **Bulletin on Marketing Success Stories in LBS** was researched and written by Community Literacy of Ontario. CLO is a provincial network of community-based Literacy and Basic Skills agencies. We are located in Barrie, Ontario. You can learn more about our organization by visiting our [website](#) and by following us on Facebook and Twitter.

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Canada 

EMPLOYMENT
ONTARIO

Ontario 



info@communityliteracyofontario.ca



communityliteracyofontario.ca



(705) 733-2312



@CommunityLiteracyOntario



@love4literacy