



Outreach and Communication



For effective Information and Referral (I & R) service, you can't just sit back and hope clients will come. Outreach is the part of I & R that gets in touch with your community rather than waiting for the community to contact you. It is how you capture attention, in order to

- inform others about your Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) services
- invite new clients to contact you
- get referrals from other service providers
- provide understanding of the Ontario Adult Literacy Curriculum Framework (OALCF) to those who provide the next step in the learners' goal paths (transition partners)

Outreach and communication activities can be varied. They can be aimed at different people and groups. However, your overall goal in outreach is providing more people with the literacy services and supports they need.

Have a Strategy

For outreach to be efficient and effective you need a plan. Developing an outreach strategy takes work, but is well worth the effort. Unfortunately, there is no "one-size-fits-all" approach. The following steps can serve as a guide.

Review

The first step to developing a new outreach strategy is analyzing what your organization has already tried. Asking the following questions may help with this evaluation.

- What outreach efforts (activities, campaigns, materials, etc.) have been done so far?
- Who did you target in previous activities (audience)?
- What worked?
- What didn't work?
- What partnerships have already been created or tried?

Identify Goals and Outcomes

Once you have looked back on previous outreach activities and reflected on the degrees of success or failure, set the goals and outcomes for your new outreach campaign.

Goals should be unique to your agency and program. They should be general statements with a broad focus. Examples are: increasing your numbers of learners, gaining community recognition, raising awareness, changing perceptions, introducing new programming or encouraging employers to hire/help workers with literacy challenges.

Outcomes should be more specific and they should be measurable (for example, increasing learner numbers by 10% in the next fiscal year). Goals and outcomes may be tied to your LBS Business Plan, Literacy Services Planning and Coordination (LSPC) Plan or Quarterly Status and Adjustment Report (QSAR).

Identify Target

Each audience has its own wants and needs, so they all have to be approached in different ways. Identifying your target is important in sending the right message to the right audience.

Learner Recruitment Targets

If you are looking for more learners, you may base your strategy on a group you feel you are not currently reaching effectively, or a target group that MTCU has identified as the most in need of LBS services. Your target group may be described in one or more terms. For example, your target audiences might be single mothers under 30 years of age or 45 to 64-year-old men who are unemployed. Here are some other categories you might consider:

- gender
- age
- prior schooling
- race/ethnicity
- employment status
- source of income

Other Targets

Not all your targets will be potential learners. You may also want to get more volunteers. Some of your outreach and communication targets may not even be individuals, but rather other organizations or agencies. You may want to direct your attention to:

- referral partners – groups or services that might refer people to your program
- transition partners – organizations that provide the “next steps” along learners’ goal paths, such as schools, colleges, training institutes or employers

By identifying your target, you can choose communication tools and customize messages according to the habits, needs and wants of the intended audience. In turn, you are more likely to get a reaction, response or change in behaviour from your outreach campaign.

Research

An outreach strategy needs researching. Some of the things you should investigate are:

- **Clear understanding of target** – You need to consider why this target audience has not been responding sufficiently in the past. What barriers do they have that you need to address, such as stigma around literacy challenges, past failure or lack of funds? How can you make your message compelling? How does your target most often communicate and get information?
- **Community need** – What is going on with your community that affects your services? Consider your community as a whole and be aware of local trends. Statistically, is there a sufficient number of your target group? Are community demographics changing? Is there competition for the target audience's attention? Are there service gaps? Are the programs you offer relevant?
- **Resources** – What resources do you have in your organization to do outreach? This can include human resources, time, skills and finances. What resources are in your community for funding or assistance in getting your message(s) out? [Partnerships](#) can cut your costs and/or increase impact. A partner can provide advice, funding, technical expertise, access to your audience, etc.
- **Challenges** – Playing “devil’s advocate” and exploring the challenges your outreach campaign may face is worthwhile. Do some problem solving and consider other options before you expend valuable resources on efforts that might not work.

Develop and Carry Out Your Plan

Once you have completed all the preliminary steps, creating the actual plan should not be difficult. Your plan should include:

- Budget
- Key Audience(s)
- Key Message(s)
- Method(s) of Distribution:
 - Press Releases
 - Articles
 - Letters to the Editor
 - Social media
 - Press Conferences; Radio, Television or Press Interviews; and Media Tours
 - Spokespersons (successful learners, community leaders, celebrities, etc.)
 - Seminars or Speaking Engagements
 - Tables at events
 - Intended Response
 - Timelines

Evaluate

One of the points in the [MTCU Requirements](#), discussed in the previous section, was: “Evaluate the effectiveness of the outreach strategy and activities and revise accordingly.” At key points, as you implement and carry out your plan, you need to review it. Are you still on track for the timelines and budget? Are you still moving towards your intended goals and outcome objectives? What is working? What is not working and why? What has been achieved? Did you accomplish anything you didn't expect? What changes need to be made?

Following the above six steps (Review, Identify Goals and Outcomes, Identify Target, Research, Develop Plan and Evaluate) is just one way to create an Outreach Strategy. For more information on Outreach Planning, see the Literacy Basics module on Marketing and some of the [Additional Resources](#) at the end of this module.

Delivering the Message

A critical part of your Outreach Plan is how to contact your target audience. Each audience may require a different means of communication. Meeting with other community service providers or sending an email to an Ontario Works caseworker are good ways to communicate with an audience, but contacting potential learners may be a different matter.

Word of Mouth

Almost all LBS programs name word of mouth as the most successful way to reach learners. By this, we mean that new learners are often told about the program by a friend or family member.

Learners can spread the word and refer new learners to your program. Adult students are a wonderful inspiration to potential learners. Don't forget exiting learners as a method of outreach. The sole determinant of Customer Satisfaction, in the Customer Service dimension of the Service Quality Standard, is the response to one question:

“On a 1-5 scale, how likely are you to recommend the LBS Program to someone looking for similar services as those you received?”

Just by asking this question, which we are required to do anyway, we put the “recommend someone” thought into learners' heads.

Word of mouth also includes family and friends sharing the need for literacy instruction and the availability of programs. ABC Life Literacy's “*Who Wants to Learn?*” research further confirmed the importance of family and friends when it found that 32% of potential learners heard about literacy programming from family and friends. As it is sometimes difficult to reach potential learners themselves, targeting this audience might be a strategy to consider.

Using Learner Stories for Outreach

Involving adult students in promoting your literacy program is extremely effective. Their “from-the-heart” testimonials on the impact of literacy on their lives move and inspire others. Whether through community presentations, quotes in promotional materials, newspaper articles or radio public service announcements (PSA), be sure to include the voices of adult students.

Ways learners can help to spread your message:

- Student newsletters
- Learner success stories
- As guest speakers and spokespersons
- Create student business cards for your agency
- Hold open houses that include learners
- Host student recognition events
- Include them in outreach presentations, display table events, etc.

Get learners' stories and experiences in writing. Then get their permission to publish or use their stories in your newsletter, on your website, in brochures and during community presentations. One example of this is Kingston Literacy and Skills' (KL&S) link on their home page that says, "[How Kingston Literacy & Skills helped me.](#)" To see the videos this link refers to, go to www.klandskills.ca/videos.htm. If you want some more ideas, Essential Skills Ontario (previously Ontario Literacy Coalition) has produced a wonderful resource to help literacy programs start up a learner speaker program: [Let the Experts Do the Talking! A Manual for Literacy Organizations Starting a Learner Speaker Program](#). You can find this through the Copian library at <http://en.copian.ca/library/learning/experts/cover.htm>