



March 2022

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# **Learner Recruitment Challenges and Strategies**

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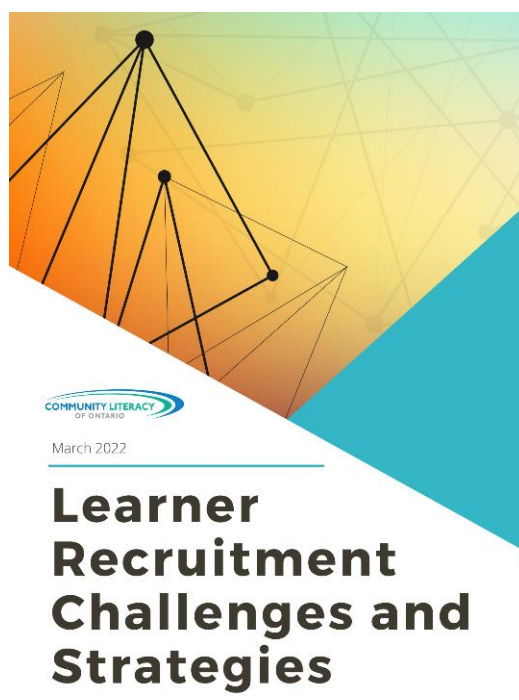




## Learner Recruitment Challenges and Strategies Report

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# Introduction

## Our Research Goals

In the current climate brought about by COVID-19 and the resulting closures of many community places and spaces over the past two years, there is a critical need to share marketing strategies, ideas and promising practices amongst LBS programs in Ontario. Accordingly, as one of our business plan deliverables for 2021/22, Community Literacy of Ontario (CLO) researched and wrote this report on the challenges faced and strategies used by community-based Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) agencies to recruit learners.

The need for learner recruitment strategies is well summarized in the following quote that was shared by a literacy educator as part of CLO's research process:

***“Marketing and learner recruitment is very hard now. Our numbers are down, no matter how hard we try. Not sure what to do.”***

CLO's Board and staff believe that it was very important to research:

- The “tried and true” methods of learner recruitment
- The new methods LBS agencies were using in the face of the major disruptions caused by COVID-19
- The strategies that were no longer working
- The learner recruitment challenges faced by LBS agencies

## The Research Process

In October 2021, CLO sent out a four-question survey on learner recruitment issues to community-based literacy educators across Ontario. In total, educators from 34 different Literacy and Basic Skills programs responded to our survey.

We also held two focus groups on learner recruitment. A provincial focus group was held in June 2021 and a regional event was held in October 2021. In total, 25 literacy educators participated in these two focus groups.

To complete the research process, CLO also conducted internet research, a review of select program websites and social media and gathered learner recruitment stories and promotional resources from various LBS programs.

## Our Report

All of CLO's research and information was compiled and analyzed, then summarized in our report: **Learner Recruitment Challenges and Strategies**.

Community Literacy of Ontario is very happy to have this opportunity to support adult learners and LBS programs! We sincerely hope that this report is helpful to you in the important work you do.

## A Word of Thanks

We offer our sincere thanks to the amazing literacy educators who took the time to answer our survey, participate in a focus group, and share successes and challenges. Your heart for adult learners is deeply inspiring, and your generous sharing on a variety of learner recruitment issues will support community-based literacy agencies all across Ontario.

Thank you for your hard work and dedication!

## About Community Literacy of Ontario

Community Literacy of Ontario (CLO) is a provincial network of community-based Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) agencies. We are located in Barrie, Ontario.

You can learn more about our organization and access our amazing resources by visiting our [website](#) and following us on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#).



## Successful Learner Recruitment Strategies

Our research found a wide variety of successful learner recruitment strategies used in Ontario's community-based Literacy and Basic Skills agencies. They are described here in order of popularity.

We recognize that community-based LBS agencies face serious funding limitations and that staff have differing capacity and skills related to marketing and learner recruitment.

Further, we realize that the pandemic has impacted many aspects of learner recruitment and community engagement. However, it is our hope that these various strategies will resonate in different ways with different organizations and that they will give you ideas and inspiration to support your work in your community.

### Community Agencies and Partners

Community-based LBS educators indicated that recruiting learners via referrals from and linkages with community agencies and partners was the most effective strategy.

Agencies were actively engaged in linking with a diverse variety of community partners. The most common sources of agency referrals were Ontario Works, Ontario Disability Support Program and Employment Services.

COVID-19 had many negative impacts on recruiting learners to LBS agencies from community and government organizations. Literacy educators commonly noted that partner relationships had suffered during the pandemic. Many community and government organizations moved to remote operations, and/or changed their focus during the pandemic. For example, Ontario Works, because of the severity of the crisis, switched their focus to life stabilization – rather than referring people for training. Further, respondents noted that in some cases, staff in various organizations had either moved on to other positions, retired early or resigned.

Here were some of the strategies LBS agencies used to link with community agencies and partners:

- Engage in strong, targeted outreach, follow up and relationship building with their most common referral organizations (typically, but not always, Ontario Works, ODSP and Employment Services)

- Communicate regularly with community partners using a variety of methods (email, meetings, social media, etc.)
- Participate in or host ZOOM meetings and other activities to build connections, share information and engage with other service providers
- Given the staff turnover in some community organizations, continually update contact information and engage in ongoing relationship building with new staff
- Regularly update promotional information on LBS services provided
- Assess your strategy as a community partner – are you making the most of their referrals and are you referring back to them?
- Host presentations on LBS services to community partners
- Actively link on social media with community partners (follow their pages, like and comment on their posts and tag them in relevant activities)
- Consider outreach to your municipal council to ensure that they are aware that your LBS agency is a valued community partner
- Re-engage Ontario Works staff by linking with them to help them understand how LBS fits into the “life stabilization” framework
- Add the staff of community agencies to your agency’s email list – and continually update this list due to staff turnover
- Set up reciprocal office visits between LBS and community agencies in order to build relationships and mutually gain a clearer sense of the programs and services offered by each organization
- Engage in a variety of partnerships with community organizations in order to meet the needs of learners and the community



## Social Media

Recruiting learners via social media is a very popular strategy with community-based Literacy and Basic Skills agencies.

Overwhelmingly, practitioners mentioned that posting marketing information on their agency's Facebook page is the most popular tool. Many find that Facebook is the social media platform most commonly used by learners. Other platforms such as Instagram were occasionally mentioned.

LinkedIn received one mention, with an agency noting that they post marketing materials on LinkedIn with a tag line *"Do you work with someone who can benefit from upgrading their essential skills?"*



As well as posting on their own Facebook page, some agencies posted to the Facebook pages of other community groups, local service providers, or local news pages. Some asked social service providers, for example the United Way, to profile their agency on Facebook. A couple of practitioners posted about their agencies on Facebook Marketplace. Those who chose this strategy of posting to external Facebook pages often found it to be quite successful.

Others made a point of commenting on the social media posts of partner organizations in order to raise their profile.

Some LBS agencies have been using paid posts on Facebook in order to boost their content. They have targeted a specific region and demographic. This has been a fairly recent tactic for most, so whether or not paid posts have been successful is currently unknown. Paid posts are relatively inexpensive though, so those who have been participating, seem to feel that it is worth the effort to experiment.

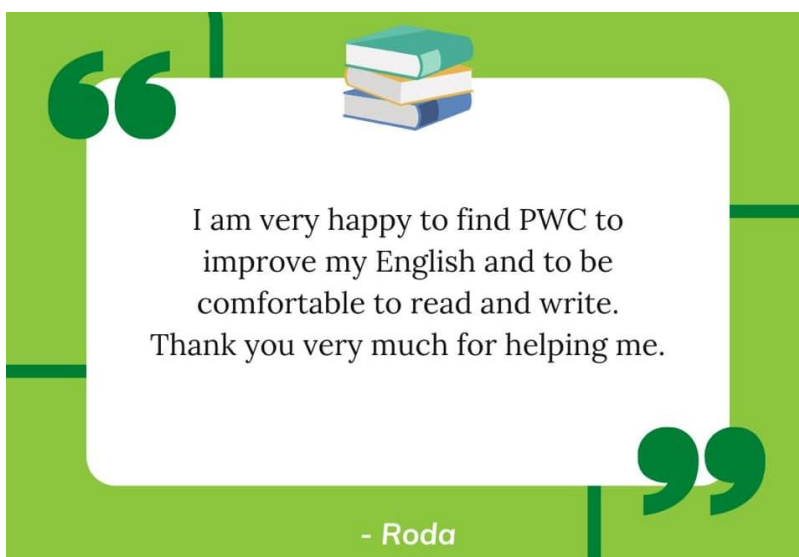
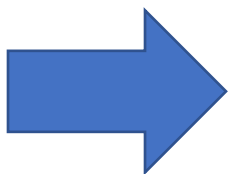
## Word of Mouth

Despite technology, despite the pandemic and despite the many changes to our society, in the world of adult literacy, educators noted that word of mouth is still one of the most effective methods of recruiting learners.

For vulnerable and marginalized groups, a referral from a trusted friend, family member or staff person sometimes is the most powerful tool of all. LBS agencies have long relied upon this method of recruitment and have sought ways to make it easier for word of mouth referrals to happen.

Strategies to increase word of mouth referrals include:

- Intentionally asking learners to speak to their friends and family about LBS programming
- Providing small referral cards that can be easily handed out
- Offering small incentives (\$10 Tim Horton's gift card, etc.) to learners who refer someone for LBS instruction
- Making agency websites user-friendly for learners and other stakeholders to share information with others
- Actively celebrating learner success (this is a good practice generally, but can also engage family and friends)
- Posting quotes from learners on posters, flyers, websites and social media, as People, Words and Change has done in this quote



## Profiling Learner Stories

In a world full of marketing noise, profiling learner stories was identified by literacy educators as an impactful strategy.

LBS agencies profile learner stories in many different ways, including:

- Creating videos and sharing them on websites, emails and on social media
- Asking learners to share their stories at AGMs, meetings, presentations, etc.
- Sending learner stories and pictures to the local print media
- Sharing learner stories and pictures on agency websites, presentations, social media and more
- Creating promotional material that includes quotes and pictures of learners

In one example, Tri County Literacy Network created a series of videos called [Learning to Earning](#) that showcase how and why adult upgrading in LBS can lead to one's future success.

### TCLN's [Learning to Earning](#) Videos

#### Learning to Earning: Preparing for Apprenticeship



#### Learning to Earning: Real People, Real Stories



## Assessing, Tracking and Planning

Some educators mentioned the need to assess your target audience, track the success of your strategies and plan the best approach to marketing in your agency.

CLO fully understands that LBS agencies do not receive funding for marketing, nor do they have adequate staff capacity. However, implementing a few of these strategies has helped various LBS agencies to focus their marketing efforts and save time and money.

Strategies in this area include:

- Assess who is your specific target audience and tailor your marketing messaging to them. Don't waste time using a scattershot approach.
- Consider what works best for your agency in terms of marketing. What best fits the needs of your target audience, your organizational culture, funding, and staff skill set? Is it print, email, social media, video, flyer, radio, or a mix of several types?
- Look at how people are accessing information about your organization. How do learners and partners currently reach you? What's working and what's not working? What needs to change?
- Track common points of contact with referral agencies in order to assess the effectiveness of various recruitment strategies. One agency uses a Google Form for this tracking function so that all staff can easily contribute.
- Track the performance of the promotional information you email out via MailChimp or Constant Contact in order to identify your top referrers. One agency found to their surprise that the local Children's Aid forwarded their email 41 times! They hadn't known that this organization was a strong supporter of their LBS agency prior to tracking results.
- Decide what product or products you are primarily marketing. Are you trying to promote digital literacy? General upgrading opportunities? Short, specific courses? Training related to workforce skills? Programming for youth?
- For paid posts on social media, first figure out the learner demographics you want to reach and then target specific audiences.

While it is now somewhat dated, Community Literacy of Ontario's online marketing guide provides excellent content related to assessing, tracking and planning for marketing. See: [MARKETING OURSELVES: A Resource for Ontario's Community Literacy Agencies](#).

## Offer Short, Specific Learning Opportunities and Certificates

Offering short, specific, targeted training opportunities to learners or to the community at large was an excellent recruitment strategy for some LBS agencies.

These types of learning opportunities could be focused on a variety of learner goals such as apprenticeship, employment, or independence. Because of the clear focus and short timelines, often LBS agencies found these sorts of training opportunities to be easy to market and effective in engaging learners.

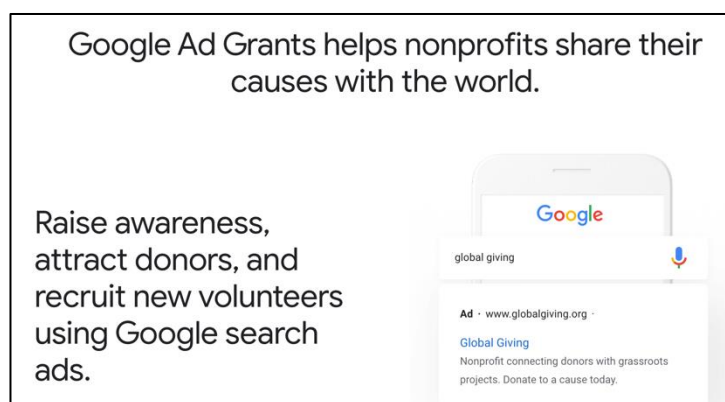
As well, some LBS agencies offer short programming that appeals broadly to both learners and the general public (i.e. Digital Basics, Money Matters, Voting Basics). This sort of programming builds awareness and support in the community, and provides exposure to agency services and can result in new referrals or other types of support.

Further, LBS educators noted that offering workforce related certificates as part of their LBS programming was an effective recruitment strategy. This could include offering access to workshops such as WHMIS, Safe Food Handling, Smart Serve, Customer Service and Health and Safety.

## Paid Advertisements

Paying for advertisements was another suggested learner recruitment strategy. A variety of strategies were used, including:

- Paying for promoted posts on social media (Facebook, in particular, was mentioned)
- Advertising on traditional media such as radio and print media
- Using Google Ad Grants: <https://www.google.ca/grants/>
- Paying for a promoted business listing on Google My Business: <https://www.google.com/business/>

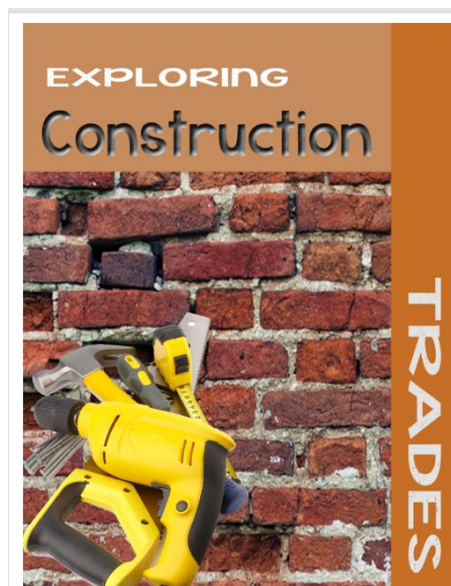


## Offer Workforce-Related Curriculum

LBS agencies noted that promoting the opportunity for learners to upgrade their skills using workforce-related curriculum on topics linked to their future career interests is a helpful recruitment strategy.

Curriculum examples include:

- Digital literacy
- Landscaping and Grounds Maintenance
- Kitchen Helper
- Clerical Assistant
- Warehouse Worker and Material Handler
- Exploring Automotive Trades
- Exploring Construction Trades

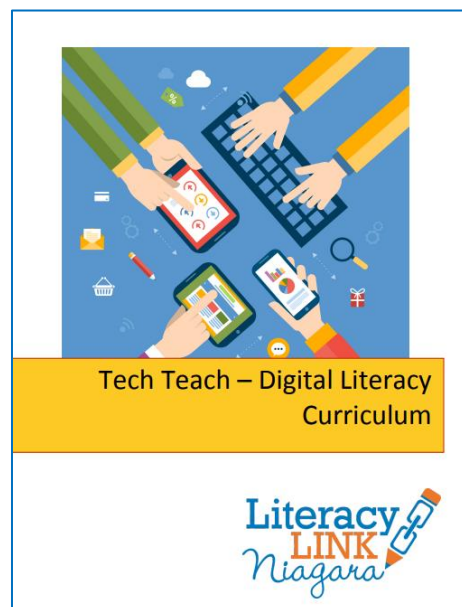


Community Literacy of Ontario has co-created various curricula. Click [here](#) to access these valuable resources. As well, there are many curricula resources available from diverse organizations on Laubach Literacy Ontario's and CLO's [LBS Resource Forum](#).

In one innovative example, Literacy Link Niagara created the [Reverse Mentoring](#) curriculum. This curriculum supports youth to mentor seniors (and others) to build their digital literacy skills.

*"Youth in Niagara (those under 29) have these digital literacy skills, but may lack experience in volunteer/employment positions. With proper materials and coaching, Literacy Link Niagara paired youth with those looking to increase their digital literacy skills, making both parties more equipped for employment and more attractive to employers."*

(Literacy Link Niagara's Reverse Mentoring Project)

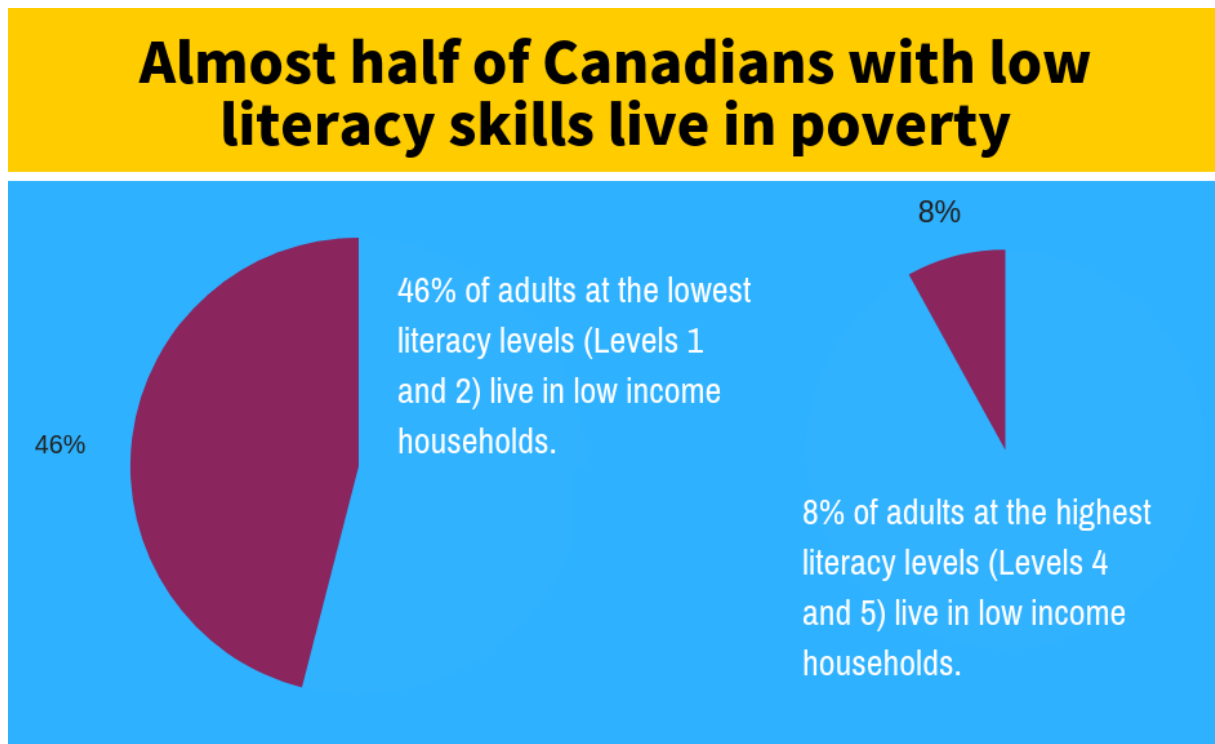




## Building on Existing Campaigns and Promotional Materials

Some literacy educators build learner recruitment strategies around materials or campaigns created by others. Examples of this include:

- Community Literacy of Ontario's Literacy: Why it Matters
- ABC Life Literacy Canada's Family Literacy Day
- UNESCO's International Literacy Day
- Provincial Support Organizations for Literacy's Literacy and Basic Skills: Employment Ontario's Skill-Building Provider
- ABC Life Literacy Canada's Skills for Success Day



Find out more about the state of literacy in Ontario:  
Get the updated 2018 "Literacy: Why It Matters" today.



## Traditional Media

Some LBS agencies still use traditional media to recruit learners and this is typically done in concert with other approaches. With some learners, print media and radio still work well.

Traditional media used included linking with the local radio station and/or newspaper to promote learner stories, LBS events and other agency news. In a few cases, flyers were used in grocery stores, and at other local organizations and businesses.

## Website Review

Some literacy educators noted that while websites have been around for several decades, they needed to ask themselves some hard questions about their websites in order to better engage learners and referral partners.

These website review questions varied by agency. Review questions included:

- Is our website sufficiently up to date?
- Is it mobile friendly?
- Is our website user friendly for learners and their family and friends?
- Does it make the referral process simple and clear?
- Is the info@ email address on our website regularly monitored?
- Does our website have a live chat feature?
- Could learners register directly via our website?

Several practitioners mentioned that allowing interested learners to register directly on their website to receive more information about their LBS program, led to an increase in registrants, as opposed to having to call or email for information. This process was simpler, quicker and more immediate for some learners.



## Incentives for Learners

Some LBS agencies mentioned using small incentives to attract learners to their program. These typically involved giving learners a gift card from Tim Horton's or other similar business in order to incentivize word of mouth referrals to their friends and family. Occasionally, incentives might involve a prize giveaway.

## Gaining Learner Feedback

When in doubt, go direct to the source!

Many LBS educators ask learners directly for their ideas on effective marketing tools, engaging language, impactful images and more. Gaining learner input could take place during the intake process (asking learners what most interested them about attending the LBS agency, etc.), via surveys, informal conversations and by hosting learner focus groups on this topic.

If an agency is seeking to engage a specific demographic (youth, seniors, people seeking to enter the skilled trades, parents, etc.) they might consult with people from that demographic, in order to tailor the messaging directly to that group.

## Digital Literacy Learning Opportunities

Given the ever-increasing importance of digital literacy, promoting LBS programming in this area works well as a recruitment strategy. Whether for adult upgrading, accessing community services, helping children with their schooling or accessing critical information about health, employment and income support, it's a digital world.

During the pandemic, most LBS agencies have further developed their digital literacy programming, and these programs are popular with both adult learners and the general public. The programming offered is extremely diverse – everything from teaching basic computer classes, to learning how to use cell phones, tablets and ZOOM, to using Google Workspace, and much, much more.

For some ideas and inspiration on this topic, be sure to read CLO's "[Digital Literacy Success Stories In Ontario's Community-Based LBS Agencies](#)".

For a great example, on the following page of this document, see the creative opportunities for digital learning offered by the Timmins Learning Centre.

# MOBILE TECHNOLOGY Learning Series

**Personal Electronic Devices 101**  
The basics of how phones, tablets, and smartphones network  
Thursday, March 24 2022  
4:00 PM

**Apple Products**  
For you iPhone, iPad, and Apple watch devices  
Thursday, March 31 2022  
4:00 PM


**Android Products**  
For you Samsung, Google, and other Android devices  
Thursday, March 31 2022  
5:00 PM

**IoT - Internet of Things**  
Using SMART devices outside of phones, and navigation technology safely.  
Thursday, April 7 2022  
4:00 PM


Contact (705)-268-8900  
or email [info@timminslearningcentre.ca](mailto:info@timminslearningcentre.ca)

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## Engage the Community on Broader Issues

Community-based literacy agencies typically have a broader mandate in their communities besides LBS: the mandate of promoting literacy for all ages and highlighting the socio-economic benefits of adult education. Therefore, some educators seek to capture the attention of the community at large who often engage well with these broader issues. Once they become engaged in literacy issues broadly, it becomes easier to promote the LBS program.

Here are some examples:

- Promoting the importance of family literacy. Here's a wonderful article written about the Orillia and District Literacy Council in tandem with Family Literacy Day: "[Beyond the books: Literacy is about much more than reading](#)".
- Actively linking literacy to important issues such as poverty, health, employment and more at community consultations and events, and on social media.
- Engaging in community events with visible tools such as the Literacy Bike. (For more details on the amazing Literacy Bike, read the following section on "[Recruitment in Action](#)").
- Being a good partner by promoting relevant community events for partner organizations.
- Holding fundraising events (in pre-pandemic times) that engage the community (spelling bees, golf tournaments, scrabble contests, community dinners, etc.).
- Championing the love of reading for both children and adults.
- Hosting a Little Free Library at their LBS agency to engage the general public. In a new and engaging twist, [Literacy Lambton](#) hosts a "pop-up" little libraries in local parks or at community festivals.

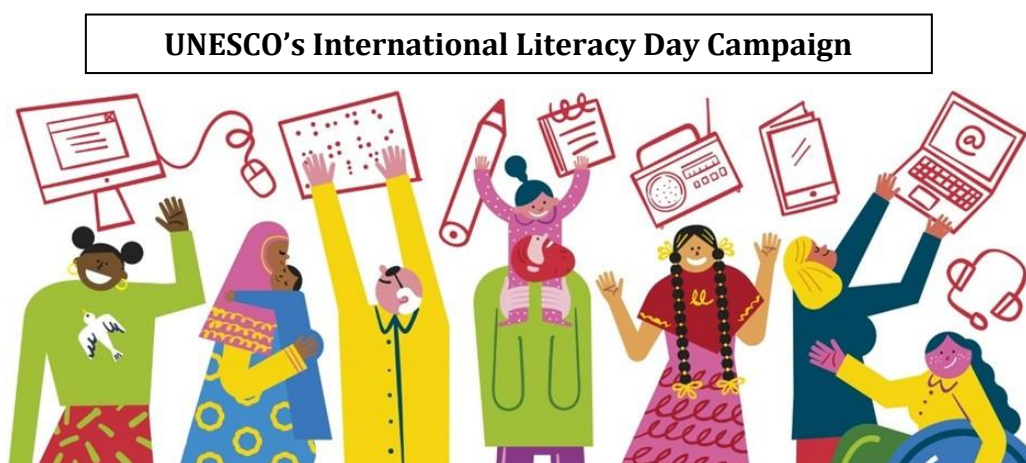


## Reducing Stigma & Rebranding

Some literacy educators mentioned the importance of rebranding the word literacy and LBS terminology in order to reduce the stigma. This involved using skills based terms to promote their programs and services. For example, adult learning, essential skills development, adult upgrading, and lifelong learning are all terms that have been used.

**Many respondents noted that it would be very beneficial if the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development would fund a provincial marketing campaign for LBS programming.**

A decade ago, the Ministry funded the “**What Did You Learn Today?**” campaign to promote and rebrand adult learning. This campaign was widely embraced by LBS programs.



## Speaking Engagements

Holding speaking engagements in their local communities has long been an important way to engage stakeholders and recruit learners. Literacy educators would conduct presentations to a variety of entities such as Rotary clubs, other service clubs, social service organizations, local Chambers of Commerce and more. These community organizations tend to be made up of local leaders and well-connected individuals with deep ties to the community.

This strategy was severely impacted by COVID-19. While some presentations still occurred via ZOOM, the opportunity for valuable networking and community engagement is limited on virtual platforms. However, as our province re-opens and as we hope for the end of COVID-19, many LBS educators look to the future to resume this strategy.

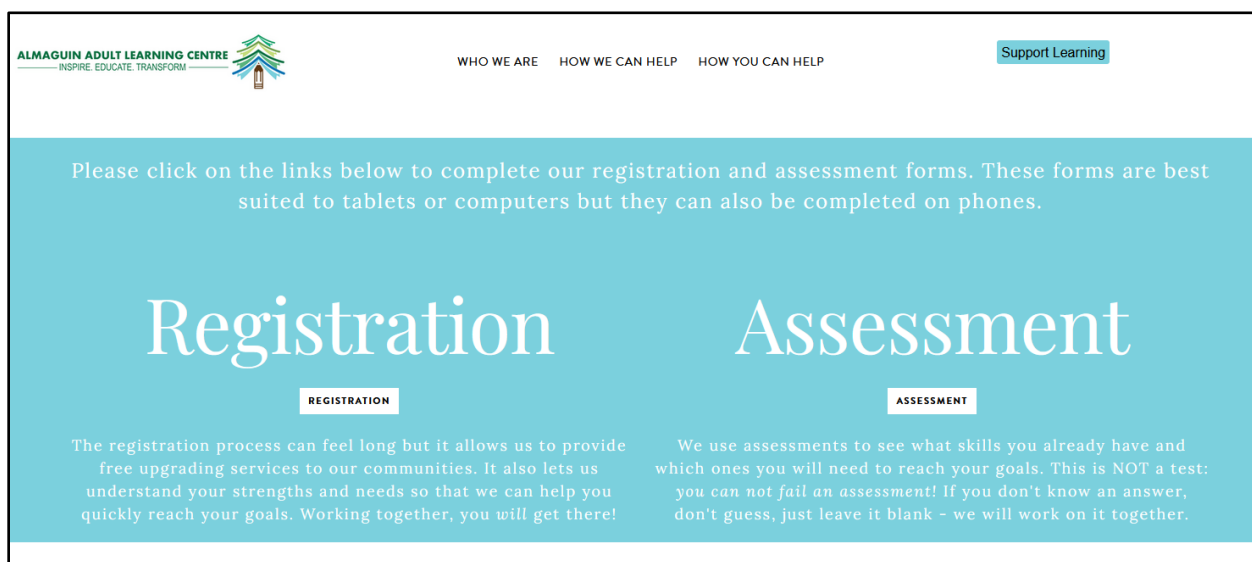
## Stories from the Field – Recruitment in Action

During CLO's research into learner recruitment strategies and challenges in community-based LBS agencies, we came across many helpful examples from programs across Ontario. We are very pleased to share various stories of learner recruitment in action.

### Program Example – Website & Digital Registration *Randie Doornink, Lead Instructor, Almaguin Adult Learning Centre*

In early 2021, the [Almaguin Adult Learning Centre](#) received funding from MLTSD under its Emergency Relief Fund (ERF) program. Throughout 2020 we had struggled to capture registrations, assessments, etc. for the learners we had begun working with. We were able to address this by subscribing to an online form builder called Jotform. This platform had a fairly steep learning curve, but it has allowed us to move the registrations, assessments, exits, and other documents necessary to meet our funding obligations online.

We have had great feedback on our forms and it has made engaging with virtual learners possible. These forms are not visible on our website; they are shared with our clients through email links. Funding through ERF also allowed us to upgrade some of our digital equipment to better connect with learners virtually, as well as allowing us to provide access to data for those clients without internet access.





## Program Example – Joining Social Media Groups

*Jacky Catterick, Executive Director, Niagara West Adult Learning Centre*

[Niagara West Adult Learning Centre](#) (NWALC) is centrally located in a very diverse area of Niagara. We have many small suburban neighborhoods as well as vast farmlands. As the new Executive Director, I decided early on that NWALC could reach many more learners over various social media outlets. Over the past year we have ramped up our presence on social media by joining social media groups set up by local community organizations - for example; Moms of Niagara West, Niagara 411, Community Watch of Lincoln, West Lincoln and Grimsby. As members of these groups we share all of our flyers for events, workshops, tutoring services as well as recruitment posters for our board and for new tutors.

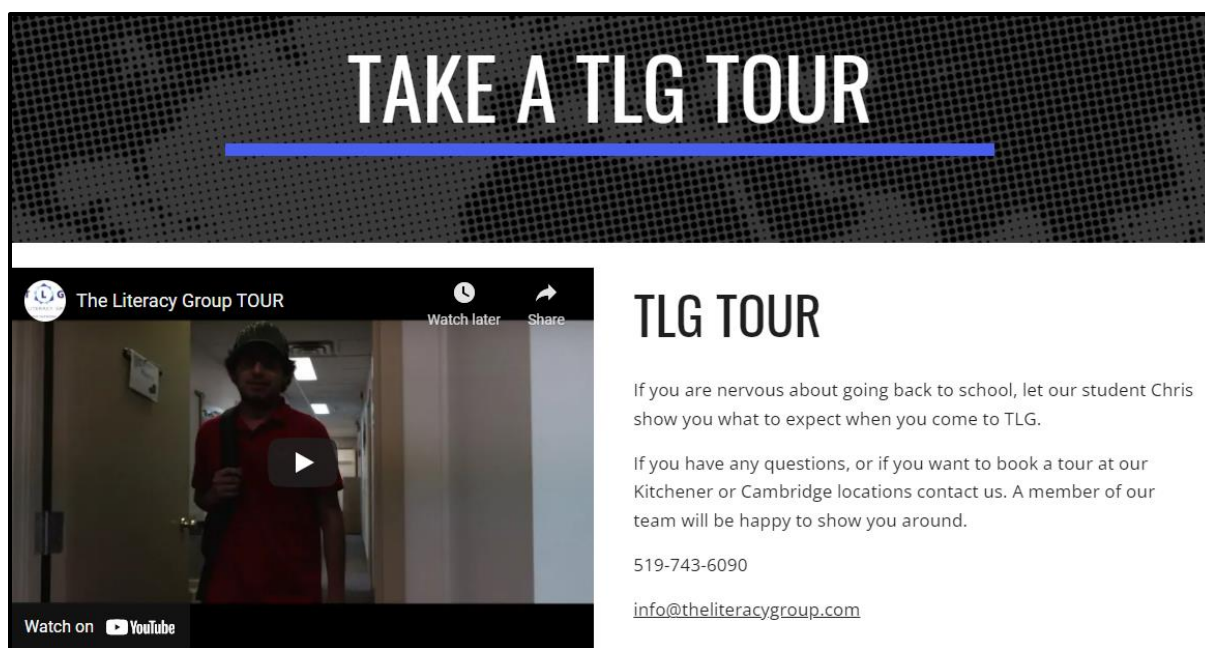
Our best connection to date is via Niagara 411. Niagara 411 is a Facebook and Instagram page that provides Niagara residents with real time breaking news, traffic and crime as it happens. This site reaches over 102,464 residents across all of Niagara. I contacted the site administrator to inquire if NWALC could share its flyers to the main page. Our first post reached **15,000 people** the first weekend. Since we are a registered not-for-profit this service was free.



## Program Example – Video Tour of a Literacy Centre

### *The Literacy Group of Waterloo Region*

The [Literacy Group](#) created this wonderful video called “[Take a TLG Tour](#).” This video is hosted on their website and is designed to inform potential learners about The Literacy Group’s services and reduce anxiety about attending their program. Take a tour with Chris!



## Program Example – The Power of Storytelling

### *Mira Clarke, Executive Director, Action Read Community Literacy Centre*

Make storytelling real, bring it home, and make it personal. People relate to stories, but we may have to work a little harder to find stories that are powerful and moving. We may need assistance from people outside our sector to help us recognize these. And, we need to get these stories into mainstream media!

Use storytelling and images together. [Action Read](#) did an event a few years ago where learners provided an object that symbolized their journey to literacy. One person chose the first menu they ever read, another the first book she ever read, and another chose her personal journals. We put the objects in separate museum cases, and each learner explained the significance of the object for them. The event was very powerful. (Be sure to read Shawn’s story about what this event meant to him on the next page!).



**Action Read**  
COMMUNITY LITERACY CENTRE 

December, 2019

Dear Friend of Action Read,

At this time of year, we exchange gifts. The most meaningful ones reflect shared experiences, needs and interests. They say something about a shared history. Everyday at Action Read we see a different kind of gift; that of lives transformed through learning. The 'gift of literacy' can be seen in ordinary, everyday things; the evidence of lives changed.

At Action Read's 2019 'For the Love of Words' annual poetry fundraiser, learners Shawn, Courtney and Judy with facilitator Dawn Matheson, shared stories about a treasured literacy object; the first menu and book ever read, and the first journals and advocacy letters ever written. With these objects visible in museum cases, the learners spoke of what their lives were like before literacy, and how learning at Action Read changed them forever. I'd like to share their stories with you here.



**I'm Shawn. Here you may see an ordinary menu from a restaurant. But for me, it isn't ordinary. It's the first menu I could ever read.**

*"Reading and writing were never my thing growing up. Up until the last couple of years, most people didn't know I couldn't do it. I had many tricks to get by. Like memorizing everything, or copying words. Or, what I always did at restaurants. I would just open a menu, and say 'cheeseburger and fries'. Every single time. Even if I didn't feel like a cheeseburger and fries.*

*A few years ago, things happened that made me want to learn to read. I wasn't liking my job. I was getting increasingly frustrated and was losing confidence. So I decided to come to Action Read.*

*I can read now. I work days on a job I would never have applied for before as it requires reading and computer skills. My confidence has grown a ton. Even on my vacation, I brought along a fishing magazine and read it over the three hour wait at the airport instead of just sitting there. And from this menu at Montana's, I shocked my girlfriend Tracey when I read it and ordered a New York striploin! Basically, I just order whatever I want now that I can read."*

  
United Way  
South Westingham  
Ontario





## Program Example – Pop-Up Little Free Libraries

*Tracy Pound, Executive Director, Literacy Lambton*

In summer 2021, [Literacy Lambton](#) brought Pop-Up Little Free Libraries to Sarnia's hotspots: public pools, splash pads, parks, beaches, walking trails, playgrounds and dog parks. Each plastic bin had a mix of kids and adult gently loved books, as well as Ziploc bags with literacy building activities from EarlyON and the Parent Professional Resource Centre. Books held two-sided promotional rack cards like bookmarks that shared Literacy Lambton's services. The Pop-Up locations were always a surprise, moved around daily and their whereabouts shared to Literacy Lambton's social media as well as to popular Sarnia Facebook groups.

Executive Director Tracy Pound says *"It was an easy, unmanned way to get our name out in the community and share the love of reading. Such a simple concept that was met with a shocking amount of excitement. Some parents made a sport of finding the Pop-Ups with their kids. The ones at the beaches were a real hit because how often have we finished off a good read in the middle of a day at the beach and thought 'now what?' One Dad posted a thank you with a photo of he and his kids at the playground enjoying their new books. That Dad (Mike) was new to our community and joined us as a new adult program volunteer this past Fall!"*



## Program Example – Reputation, Networking and Gratitude

*Kathy Hall, Skills Training Manager, Literacy South Halton*

Kathy Hall shared three main strategies [Literacy South Halton](#) successfully uses for learner recruitment.

### REPUTATION

Referrals from our students past and present, and the people who know them, result from the way the staff and volunteers work with them as they work towards their goals.



### NETWORKING AND THE WILLINGNESS TO FILL IN GAPS

Our retired Executive Director, Elaine Austin, went out of her way to develop and maintain relationships with other community organizations. She regularly attended library events and participated in networking with the Oakville Public Library and the Burlington Public Library. Both libraries allowed LBS tutoring in pre-pandemic times, and occasionally, Literacy South Halton was able to set up a booth at the library so the surrounding residents could come and talk to us, to find out about the programs we offer.

Our link with Employment Halton resulted in our instructor and myself visiting to give a half-day workshop each to their young adults, on budgeting time and money and employment soft skills. This raised awareness of our profile with their staff, and resulted in referrals. It was definitely time well spent.

We have fostered our link with the staff at the Centre for Skills Development over many years. A meeting they set up with a speaker about autism is just one example of the ways we can network together to mutually provide benefit for the clients. Our computer instructor also works with the Centre's regular job seekers who lack the basic skills necessary for job searching.

### GRATITUDE

As a common practice I do send thanks to anyone who refers a potential learner to our organization, and when dealing with other agencies in particular, this politeness disposes them to referring to us again. If appropriate, I will also let them know if we plan to work with the learner, of course without divulging the results of the initial assessment.

## Program Example – Literacy Bike

*Robin Crank, Project Manager, Project READ (Waterloo-Wellington)*

In early 2021, [Project READ](#) (a regional literacy network in southwestern Ontario) recognized the need to find new ways to connect with families due to various public health restrictions related to COVID-19. With this in mind, the idea for a Literacy Bike program in local parks to support families came to life. With funding from the Lyle S. Hallman Foundation to create the Literacy Bike, and funding from Employment and Social Development Canada to hire a summer student, Project READ was able to offer Literacy Bike events at local parks throughout July and August 2021.

The Literacy Bike program events were designed for parents and their children between 3 to 10 years old. The program, weather dependent, ran twice a week for three hours. It was promoted by posting on various social media platforms, via email, and through word of mouth. Outcomes for the program included exposure to new literacy activities, promoting learning and play within the parks, and guidance for parents on how to improve literacy with their child. These events were very successful with an average of 50-75 people per event. This included both adults and children.

The individuals that attended the Literacy Bike events had a diverse range of cultural backgrounds and education levels. This program did not have any eligibility requirements, allowing all to be welcome.

Project READ parked the bike in a central area of a park and provided various activities surrounding the bike. All activities could be packed up in the bike so it was easy to maneuver around the parks to areas of high traffic and exposure.

Project READ's Literacy Bike program events provided a beneficial service to the community in 2021 and plans to offer these events again during the summer of 2022 are underway.



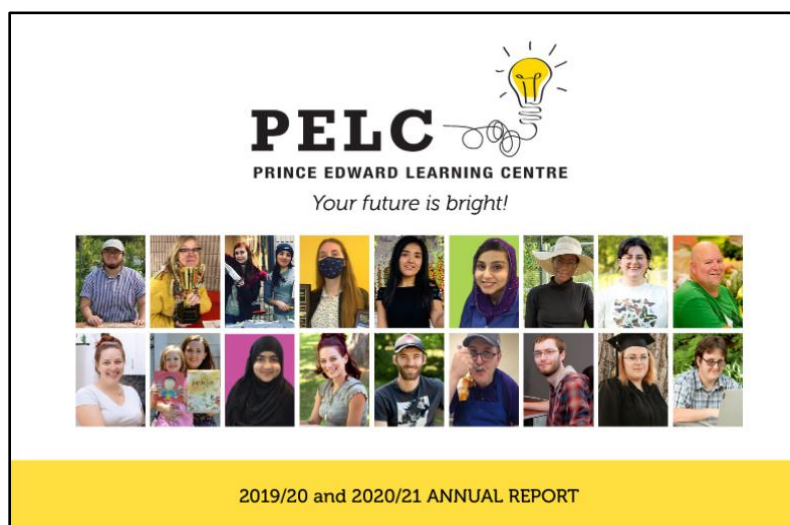
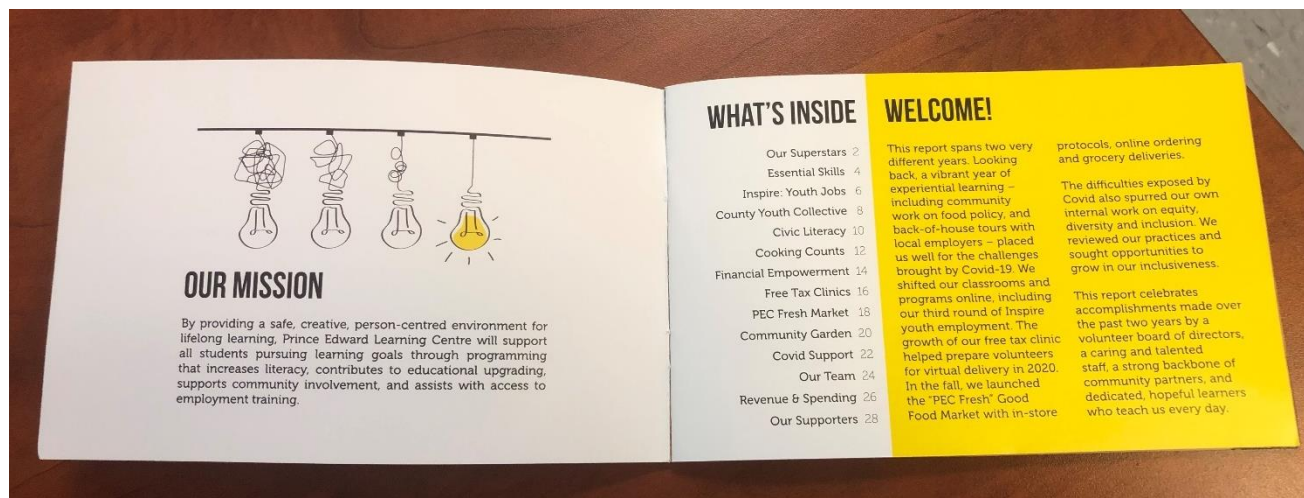


## Program Example – Showcasing our Learning Centre

*Jennifer Hunter, LBS Program Coordinator, Prince Edward Learning Centre*

We created a book for [Prince Edward Learning Centre](#)'s annual report with photos and personal growth stories from our learners and community partners. The stories from staff and learners provide a real-life look at the services and wrap-around support we offer at the learning centre. It showcases the hard work and determination of our students to reach their goals and make changes in their lives.

Our book is available in a print format, but also it is dynamically presented online via the interactive [HTML5](#) Digital Publishing Platform. Click [here](#) to view our online book!



## Program Example – Using Ads and Subscriptions for Marketing

*Randie Doornink, Lead Instructor, Almaguin Adult Learning Centre*

The [Almaguin Adult Learning Centre](#) has aggressively marketed online and has seen a big uptick in engagement.

Fairly early in 2020, the Centre was granted funding to address issues stemming from COVID-19 and the lockdowns by our local social services board (DPSSAB Relief Fund). This funding allowed us to improve our ability to stay in touch with our learners and connect with our communities. The DPSSAB funding was fairly evenly split between online social media ads (Facebook and Instagram) and subscriptions to platforms such as ZOOM, Canva, and Hootsuite.

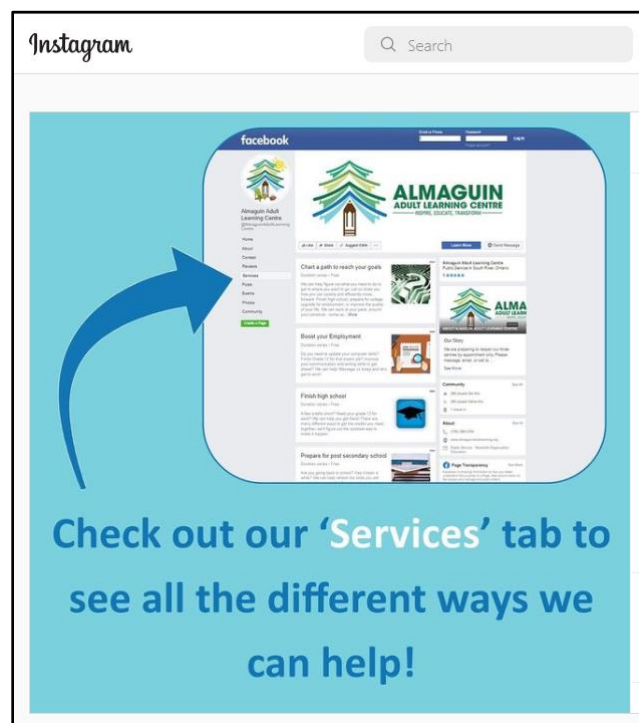
Across all of our social media accounts, we saw an 833% increase in engagement (likes, clicks, shares) and a 282% increase in follows. Additionally, our reach jumped 1786% over the previous year!

Using the funding for Hootsuite and Canva together enabled us to post daily and to boost regularly. An additional strategy that we use is to try to post one program/agency specific post per day and then have an assigned instructor post a share or other material daily on their assigned platforms. Initially, Facebook saw the greatest growth however we are seeing Instagram beginning to surpass it.

We also use Twitter, and to some degree, Pinterest, although that has not proven to be particularly useful to us.

Be sure to check out and follow Almaguin Adult Learning Centre's social media accounts:

- [Facebook](#)
- [Instagram](#)
- [Twitter](#)
- [Pinterest](#)



## Sample Boosted Post on Almaguin Adult Learning Centre's Facebook Page

<http://www.almaguinadultlearning.org/>

**Promote Website**

(705) 386-0764

Typically replies within a day  
Send message

Add Get Quote form  
Allow potential customers to answer a few questions and submit a quote request through Messenger.

learningworks@bellnet.ca

Edit Wi-Fi

Price range · Not Applicable

Open now  
9:00 AM - 3:00 PM

Public Service · Nonprofit Organization · Education

Edit Page info

**Almaguin Adult Learning Centre**  
Published by Hootsuite · February 1 at 6:00 AM

We're back, time to give us a call! Our centres are once again open by appointment - reach out and let's talk 705-386-0764 or use our Contact Us form [almaguinadultlearning.org/contactus](http://almaguinadultlearning.org/contactus) and let us know how we can help.

#AALC #AlmaguinHighlands #LifeLongLearning

**WE'RE READY WHEN YOU ARE**  
learningworks@bellnet.ca 705-386-0764

**FREE**

GRADUATE UNDERSTAND  
GROW *Getting Ahead* PLAN  
FOOD & FINANCE Microsoft Office LEARN  
TRAIN Soft Skills SOLUTIONS  
WORK skills employers want STUDY

**ALMAGUIN ADULT LEARNING CENTRE**  
INSPIRE. EDUCATE. TRANSFORM

[almaguinadultlearning.org](http://almaguinadultlearning.org) SOUTH RIVER POWASSAN BURK'S FALLS

Canada EMPLOYMENT ONTARIO Ontario Ontario's employment and training network

**Photos** See all

**Videos** See all

Almaguin Adult Learning Centre  
Public Service

1,560 People reached 49 Engagements - Distribution score

Learn more Boost again

## Program Example – Outdoor Sessions During the Pandemic

*Nanditta Colbear, Executive Director, Literacy Alliance of West Nipissing*

While the [Literacy Alliance of West Nipissing](#) was committed to following COVID-19 safety precautions, we did not want to be held hostage to the pandemic restrictions. Considered a non-essential service by the local health unit, we were asked to remain closed. We discussed the situation and felt that this was not an option. We had over 25 active learners and most were not able to participate in virtual sessions. The agency decided to offer outdoor sessions. This meant rethinking service delivery. What happens if it rains? What about hot days? Who will move furniture in/out? What about internet connection? On top of it, we were severely short staffed.

Our learners always come first. We discussed the idea with them – outside lessons – that would meet the COVID-19 safety requirements of our health unit. The learners were thrilled and agreed to help with the process. Together we did it.

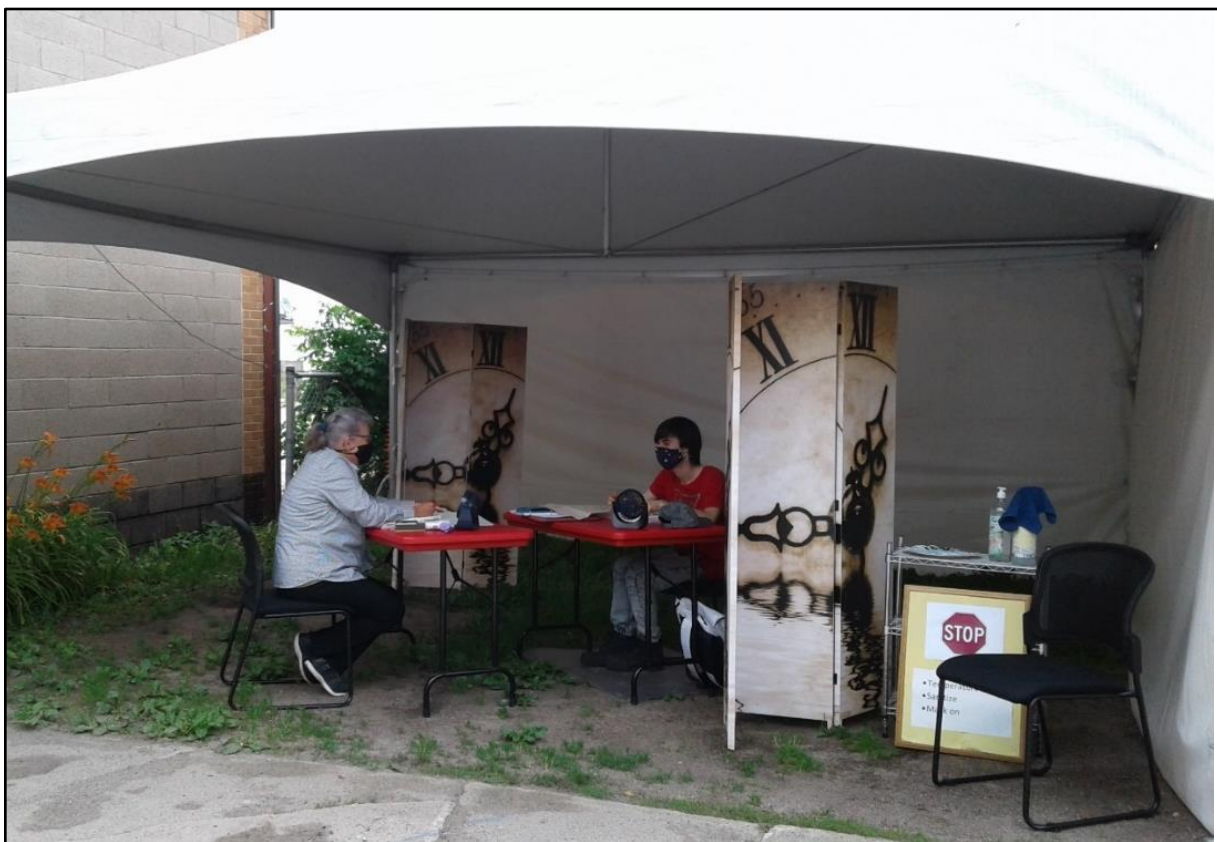
Teacher Denise's comments: *"I have always been an advocate for the outdoor classroom. I loved being outdoors, as did our learners. It was different! They appreciated that their prepping for the GED was not interrupted by COVID-19. It gave them a sense a normalcy when there was none. Being open, kept them motivated. Many of them did not want to do the video or telephone conferences. They enjoyed the one-on-one in-person contact. Their mental health improved. Attendance was very good!!!"*

It took some effort to make it a seamless experience. We were able to get portable desk fans and extend the internet to the outdoor space. The only thing missing was a BBQ. Perhaps, next summer!





Denise (Teacher) and Tyler (Learner) in the Literacy Alliance's Outdoor Classroom





## Program Example – Lack of Success with Print Media

*Shelley Harris, Director of Education and Settlement, YWCA St. Thomas-Elgin*

Over the last few years, the Skills Training and Upgrading program of [YWCA St Thomas-Elgin](#) attempted to reach a targeted group of low income, low levels of education learners with several strategies. Our community has a local daily paper, and another business delivers weekend flyers to households. Our more rural site has a popular weekly paper as well. To reach the learners, we created general newspaper ads, and designed and printed flyers to be inserted with the other advertisements. We also did direct drops using the paper's demographic information so we could deliver flyers to apartments and homes in the targeted sections of the communities.

These efforts were a time consuming and expensive processes, and despite creating compelling promotional tools, this method of advertising resulted in very few learners joining our classes.

However, we were still able to tweak this material, and use it to promote other programming. As well, we have utilized these impactful materials as a template for branding purposes on social media.

### Two Posters Created for the YWCA's Promotional Campaign



## Program Example – Developing Engaging Social Media Content

*Christopher Bott, Instructor, Literacy Council of South Temiskaming*

For the [Literacy Council of South Temiskaming](#) (LCST), the challenge isn't necessarily creating and uploading content to our platforms (Facebook, YouTube and to a lesser extent, Instagram) it is creating content that engages our key demographic. A variety of strategies have been used, such as posting visually appealing content, using plain language combined with theme based facts, trivia, video tutorials on issues commonly encountered by our learners, the promotion of other support opportunities in the area, community events and a private Facebook group for learners.

We have noted that although this strategy is helpful in terms of promoting our services to referral partners, it doesn't generate interest from potential learners, or much interaction between our current learners. So, the question is, how do we change that?

Given that we are a small, community based agency with one full time and one part-time staff member, finding opportunities to research, develop and analyze advertising strategies is a major challenge. Therefore, we are left using the trial and error method to see what generates any interest and attempt to repeat, or adjust the process. Currently, our solutions include seeking the assistance of contract work, summer students and placement students from our local community college for fresh perspectives.



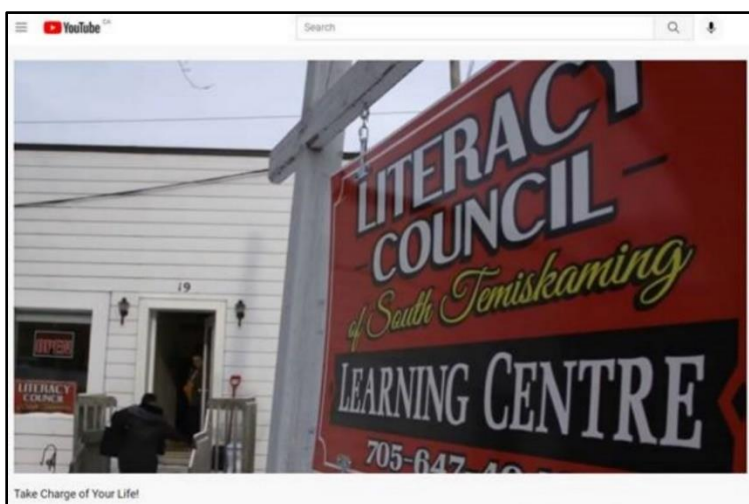
In our opinion, it may be beneficial to research, compile and share what could be considered best practices for marketing Ontario LBS agencies, not only through social media, but in a more general context as well.

LCST has created two helpful videos to promote the Council to learners:

- [Take Charge of Your Life!](#)
- [This is What We Do](#)

Check out and follow the Literacy Council of South Temiskaming's social media accounts:

- [Facebook](#)
- [YouTube](#)



## Sample Post from LCST's Facebook Page

**The Literacy Council of South Temiskaming**  
Published by Literacy Council · January 4 ·

Are you looking for a program that focuses on goal setting and job search skills needed to find employment? Are you having difficulty establishing an employment or academic goal path? Look no further! We have you covered in this 4-week ONLINE program.

Give us a call at 705-647-4040 or email [sbhughes@eastlink.ca](mailto:sbhughes@eastlink.ca) if you're interested or want more information

Start date: January 25, 2022  
End date: February 17, 2022  
Tuesdays & Thursdays from 1:00 P.M. - 2:00 P.M.... See more

## Let's Get **Real** Employment

### Setting **Real** Goals for **Real** Opportunities

**Learn how to find and apply for the work you need!**

Join us **online** for this **program** to help you to set the **job search goals** you need to **understand yourself**, your **career possibilities**, and your **job opportunities**.



Please contact the **Literacy Council of South Temiskaming** to learn more about assessment and eligibility for this program.

19 Whitewood Avenue E.  
New Liskeard, ON P0J 1P0

(705) 647-4040  
[sbhughes@eastlink.ca](mailto:sbhughes@eastlink.ca)

**EMPLOYMENT ONTARIO** 

## Program Example – Adapting to Our Changing Environment

*Sandra Altenburg, Teacher of Adult Literacy Educator, Bridges Adult Learning Centre*

Dryden lost its newspaper in May 2019, as it was an industry that was seen as being no longer viable with the ever increasing use of technology and social media. As an agency who serves adults, Bridges Adult Learning Centre relied on the newspaper for advertising to people who weren't as tech savvy, mostly our elderly population. We feel they relied on the paper and felt this was a gap.

Bridges Adult Learning Centre now advertises via:

- Social media (mostly [Facebook](#))
- Our local Radio station website where we post to their [events page](#)
- Promoting our services to our community via the Chamber of Commerce and email to local partners

Another effective way to recruit learners is via our Community Interagency Group. Our Interagency group met in person over lunch once a month in pre-pandemic times. These meetings are now done through email.

In the future, we are looking at promoting our newly made website and expanding advertising to Instagram and possibly Snap Chat. It's been quite a challenge transitioning to a more web/virtual based program, but we are getting there.





## Program Example – Offering Workshops of Public Interest

*Tracy Pound, Executive Director, Literacy Lambton*

A helpful learner recruitment strategy used by Literacy Lambton is to offer workshops that appeal broadly to the general public. Engaging the public provides great exposure to who we are and the services we offer. One example is the **Money Matters** program, sponsored by ABC Life Literacy Canada and TD Bank.

Offering **Money Matters** created more local awareness of our services and resulted in some excellent media coverage for Literacy Lambton in the community:

- *“Rebranded Literacy Lambton offering financial literacy course”* (The Sarnia Observer)
- *“Literacy Lambton offering free financial literacy course”* (Sarnia This Week)



### Money Matters

- FREE program
- One hour virtual workshops
- Wednesday nights 6:30-7:30pm
- May 4, 11, 18, 25 & June 1
- Topics: Banking Basics, Ways to Save, Spending Plans, Borrowing Money, Smart Shopping
- Ideal for ages 16+

**admin@literacylambton.org**  
**519-332-4876**



## Learner Recruitment Challenges

While LBS agencies are working hard at recruiting learners, and they are coming up with innovative ideas and experience some successes, there are many profound challenges involved.

### Lack of Funds for Marketing

The most critical challenge facing LBS agencies is the lack of funding for marketing. LBS agencies receive modest funding from the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development for program delivery. This funding covers the cost of the basic operation of the LBS programs, but it does not cover the cost of marketing tools, campaigns or staff dedicated to recruitment and marketing. This means that most community-based LBS agencies must engage in learner recruitment and marketing as an “add on” to their regular jobs.

Budgets are typically small, and there are many demands on literacy educators. Staff time is at a premium and dedicated to many other LBS tasks relating to front-line delivery, serving learners, meeting learner targets set by the Ministry and remaining in compliance with the administrative needs of the LBS program as set by the Ministry. This means that, typically, LBS program staff have limited time and attention to design and operationalize marketing strategies and campaigns.

Further, there are no (or very limited) funds available for glossy marketing materials and campaigns at a time when professional communications are the norm to get public attention. Also, paying for advertising is near impossible due to low funding levels. Often, only free advertising available via radio or print media, combined with paying for promoted posts on social media is possible.

### Lack of Marketing Skills

Another serious challenge is a lack of marketing skills. Because marketing is not a core function of the job of a literacy educator, marketing in LBS is typically tacked on to an existing position that is primarily focused on the skills needed for teaching, administration or management. Also, hiring staff dedicated to communications and marketing is unheard of in community-based LBS agencies due to financial constraints.

Therefore, marketing skills vary considerably. Some LBS staff either already had, or have gained marketing skills (though they still would face serious capacity and time constraints for marketing), while other agencies struggle with marketing in terms of skills and knowledge. There is little time available for skills building in marketing. One skill deficit in particular that was noted is designing impactful images, along with social media skills, (which is covered next).

Despite these obstacles, agencies are creative and have developed some amazing marketing tools (as can be seen in our “*Recruitment in Action*” section of this report!). Still, a lack of funding, staff capacity and dedicated marketing staff negatively impact the ability of LBS agencies to engage in marketing.

## Social Media

Almost all community-based LBS agencies have a social media presence on Facebook. Some may also have accounts on a variety of platforms, such as Twitter, Instagram and YouTube. However, many felt that their agency faced challenges with learner recruitment via social media due to a lack of funding and staff capacity. These challenges included:

- Understanding strategic social media marketing techniques
- Creating high quality content on a consistent basis
- Posting content on a regular basis
- Understanding how to effectively use various platforms beyond a basic level
- Engaging diverse stakeholders (learners, partners, volunteers, supporters, etc.)
- Learning new and up-and-coming platforms
- Developing high quality images
- Learning tips and tricks for more effective social media engagement with partners

## Stigma

There are various stigmas related to adult literacy that make learner recruitment difficult.

### *Potential Clients*

People with low literacy levels unfortunately sometimes feel a sense of shame and have sometimes made a concerted effort to hide their lack of literacy skills. This makes it hard to reach adults who may need the help of LBS programs, as they may not readily self-identify as needing LBS services. This also makes literacy issues somewhat invisible to the public eye.

### *The “L” Word*

The word “literacy” can have a negative connotation. This is related to former times, when people with low literacy levels were considered “illiterate,” and it was not understood that literacy exists on a continuum of skills, and everyone possesses a variety of meaningful skills, regardless of reading levels. **Though completely untrue**, in the past, sometimes a co-relation was made between low literacy levels and being “uneducated” or “dumb.” This means that adults needing LBS upgrading may be reluctant to attend programming.

## Lack of Community Understanding and Awareness

The general public tends to co-relate literacy with reading and with children and young people in the elementary and secondary school systems. Most people are unaware of adult literacy needs and issues, and are shocked to learn that many Canadian adults have low literacy levels. How can you market a service that addresses an issue that many people don’t realize exists? Further, most people don’t understand the strong co-relation between low literacy skills and poverty, unemployment, poorer health outcomes and more.

As well, there are many charities, causes and important needs in every community, and there is a great deal of noise on the marketing front by better resourced organizations and causes which have access to funding for professional marketing campaigns – or which may have an influential local champion. It is often hard to gain traction and awareness for adult literacy – a stigmatized and complex issue.

## Developing a Marketing Strategy

It takes time, money, insight and expertise to develop a marketing strategy. Marketing doesn't just happen; a plan must be made to reach the target audience that fits with the resources and skills of each LBS agency. When the target audience has vulnerabilities such as having low reading levels and facing socio-economic barriers, it is challenging to figure out and operationalize the best approach to marketing. Further, it's challenging to craft an impactful message that will attract vulnerable people who may feel stigmatized and isolated.

## Media Shifts

The media is rapidly changing. Firstly, the continued shift from traditional media (print and television) to online and social media. Secondly, the ever-changing nature of social media – new platforms become popular while older ones decline or change. It makes it hard to keep up and create engaging content for a vulnerable population on these ever-shifting sands. A lack of time and resources to learn new platforms – when it's already difficult to keep up with current ones – also makes marketing a challenge.

## We Can't Do It Alone!

LBS agencies need financial support for marketing from external sources such as the Ministry or foundations. We need funding to plan and enact effective strategies and create impactful and professional marketing tools (images, posters, videos, brochures, etc.).

And, a provincial marketing campaign for the LBS program, and the important work it does to support learners and their communities, would be an enormous benefit to adult learners and programs!

## The Enormous Harm Caused by COVID-19

The ability of LBS agencies to recruit learners during COVID-19 has been overwhelmingly difficult.

Here are just some of the impacts on LBS programs and adult learners related to recruitment.

### *a) Lack of Referrals from Community Partners*

Community partners, government organizations and others who normally refer to LBS agencies were not readily available during the pandemic. Offices were closed, staff was working remotely and were not seeing clients or they had changed their focus. For example, a major referral partner, Ontario Works, very rightly focused on life stabilization for its clients during the pandemic rather than on referring clients for LBS training.

### *b) Impaired Ability to Network with Community Partners*

COVID-19 resulted in an end to valuable networking opportunities with various community partners that typically resulted in referrals to LBS programs. Prior to the pandemic, literacy educators would regularly meet with community partners via networking events such as “lunch and learn” sessions, inter-agency events, partner meetings, Literacy Service Plan meetings, community events and more. While some of these events moved to an online format during COVID-19, respondents noted that while valuable, virtual networking absolutely does not have the same impact as face-to-face meetings, where both formal networking and informal networking can occur. Many noted that for networking, personal and informal connections gained via in-person meetings is critical for optimal learner recruitment.

### *c) Community Presentations and Events*

Community-based LBS agencies commonly attend local events and also conduct presentations explaining the importance of LBS programming to community groups (service clubs, partner organizations, etc.). These activities increase awareness about the need for adult literacy and the programs and services available via LBS agencies – and they serve as an opportunity for learner recruitment. Such community presentations and events rarely happened during COVID-19. For events that happened virtually, the opportunity to network and share was severely limited and this method of learner recruitment was no longer successful in most cases.



#### *d) Fundraising and Learner Recruitment*

Fundraising in community-based LBS agencies is designed not only to raise funds, but to engage the community, enhance awareness and create new referrals. COVID-19 brought fundraising events to a complete standstill and cut-off this avenue for learner recruitment.

#### *e) Changed Priorities During a Pandemic*

It is completely natural that during a global pandemic, almost everyone's priorities completely shifted. Naturally, this included adult learners. There was much fear and concern, and learning new skills was not a top priority for many – understandably so! Learners were focused on supporting their families, ensuring their health and safety, maintaining their jobs or, if they lost their job, gaining access to needed income support such as Ontario Works, ODSP or CERB. Often, motivation to learn was justifiably low, as people focused on their basic needs and getting through the pandemic.

#### *f) The Digital Divide*

During the pandemic, LBS agencies quickly shifted to online delivery. While this was welcomed by some learners, for others, the digital divide was too steep. A lack of computers, tablets and other digital devices, a lack of access to high speed internet, and a lack of digital literacy skills were significant barriers to learning online for some adult learners.

## Conclusion

Community Literacy of Ontario is grateful to the literacy educators who took the time to fill out our survey, participate in our focus groups and share stories from the field with us on the important topic of learner recruitment.

We sincerely hope that the strategies, promising practices and challenges shared in CLO's **Learner Recruitment Challenges and Strategies Report** are helpful to LBS programs as you seek to engage learners in adult learning.

Thank you for your strong commitment to serving adult learners in Literacy and Basic Skills programs across Ontario!