

LEARNER RECRUITMENT CHALLENGES

There is a critical need to share learner recruitment challenges, strategies and new approaches amongst Ontario's Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) programs. This is due to the negative impacts of COVID-19 on community programming, changing trends in marketing, the impact of new media as well as other factors. The ability of LBS programs to successfully recruit learners is critical to support communities and adults seeking to upgrade their skills.

To assist LBS agencies with this important issue, Community Literacy of Ontario (CLO) created a research report and three accompanying factsheets.

CLO's Learner Recruitment Factsheets cover the following topics:

01

Learner
Recruitment
Challenges

02

Learner
Recruitment
Strategies

03

New Approaches
to Learner
Recruitment

“

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

 info@communityliteracyofontario.ca

 communityliteracyofontario.ca

 (705) 733-2312

 @CommunityLiteracyOntario

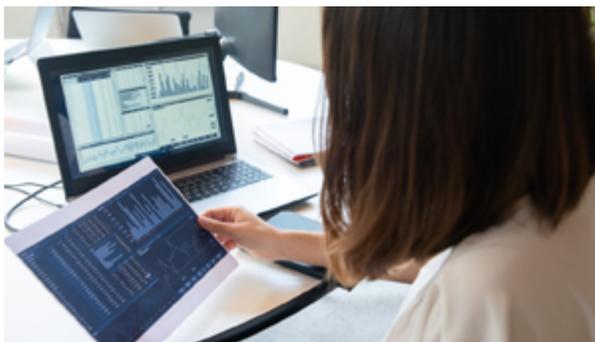
  @love4literacy

INTRODUCTION

While LBS agencies are actively involved in recruiting learners, and they are coming up with innovative ideas and experiencing some successes, there are many profound challenges involved. These challenges include a lack of funds for marketing, the stigma of literacy, massive shifts and emerging trends in media, the need for government support, the negative impact of COVID-19, limited community awareness, and more.

LACK OF FUNDS FOR MARKETING

The most critical challenge facing LBS agencies is the lack of funding for marketing. LBS agencies receive modest government funding for program delivery. This funding covers the cost of the basic operation of the Literacy and Basic Skills program, but it does not cover the cost of marketing tools, campaigns or staff dedicated to recruitment and marketing. This means that most LBS agencies engage in learner recruitment as an “add on” to their regular jobs and that staff have limited time to plan, develop and engage in marketing activities.



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. Often, only free advertising available via radio or print media, combined with paying for promoted posts on social media is possible.

STIGMA

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.

“**There’s an inherent difficulty in reaching a vulnerable group of people such as adult learners, because they often face so many barriers.**”
(Quote from an LBS Educator)

LACK OF MARKETING SKILLS

Another 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 already busy staff position that is primarily focused on the skills needed for teaching, administration or management.

SOCIAL MEDIA CHALLENGES

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, YouTube. However, many agencies face challenges with learner recruitment via social media, including: understanding strategic social media marketing techniques; creating engaging content on a consistent basis; developing high quality graphics; and learning strategies for more effective social media engagement with learners, community stakeholders and partners.



You just master Twitter and Facebook, only to find out that TikTok's the new thing for marketing."

(Quote from an LBS Educator)

MEDIA SHIFTS

The media is rapidly changing. Firstly, the continued shift from traditional media to online, informal and social media has resulted in significant changes to recruitment. This makes it hard to keep up and create engaging content to recruit a vulnerable population on these ever-shifting sands.



It's very challenging to get the wider population understand the urgency of literacy issues and the real life social and economic impacts. There is a huge lack of understanding in the community, no matter how hard we try."

(Quote from an LBS Educator)

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?

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

WE CAN'T DO IT ALONE

LBS agencies need financial support for marketing from external sources such as government or foundations. We need funding to plan and enact effective strategies and create impactful and professional marketing tools (graphic images, posters, videos, etc.). And, a government-funded 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 has been made overwhelmingly difficult due to COVID-19. Some of the Impacts are:

Tech Barriers

During the pandemic, LBS agencies 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.

Outreach

LBS agencies conduct presentations explaining the importance of LBS programming to community groups and organizations. These activities increase awareness about the need for adult literacy and the services available via LBS agencies. Such presentations could not happen during the pandemic.

Networking

COVID-19 resulted in an end to valuable networking opportunities with various community partners that typically resulted in referrals to LBS programs.

Accessibility

Community partners, government organizations and others who normally refer to LBS agencies were not readily available during the pandemic. All offices were closed, staff was working remotely and were not seeing clients or they had changed their focus.

“Normal channels aren't working. For example, Ontario Works – they aren't meeting with clients in person regularly and OW is focused on client life stabilization, not training.”
(Quote from an LBS Educator)

Priority Shifts

It is completely natural that during a global pandemic, priorities completely shifted for adult learners. There was much fear and concern, and learning new skills was not a top priority for many – understandably so! Like everyone else, learners were focused on supporting their families and ensuring their health and safety.

CONCLUSION

The **Learner Recruitment Factsheets** were 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.

We sincerely hope that the strategies, promising practices & overview of the challenges shared in our three **Learner Recruitment Factsheets** will offer ideas and inspiration to help your LBS program to recruit and engage learners. Our factsheets can be freely downloaded from CLO's website at: <https://www.communityliteracyofontario.ca>

As well, in 2021/2022, CLO conducted province-wide research and wrote a report called **Learner Recruitment Challenges and Strategies**. Download our report to learn more about this important topic: www.communityliteracyofontario.ca/wp/wp-content/uploads/Learner-Recruitment-Report-March-2022-FINAL.pdf

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 communityliteracyofontario.ca

 (705) 733-2312

 info@communityliteracyofontario.ca

 @CommunityLiteracyOntario

  @love4literacy