

Getting Started: A Dozen Things You Should Know Before Conducting an Adult Learning Campaign

So you want to do a campaign to raise adult education levels? Here are a dozen things you should know as you begin this noble effort. Do not let anything here discourage you but do use this information in your campaign design and implementation.

1. Be prepared to be a voice in the wilderness.

Making the case for adult learners can be a challenge. Though many organizations like the [Southern Regional Education Board](#) and the [Lumina Foundation](#) are sending the message that [investing in adult learning is a key to state prosperity](#), for many political and education leaders this remains a relatively low priority or invisible group. Even in states with declining youth populations and large numbers of undereducated adults the focus still tends to be on the traditional P-16 pipeline. This website has the resources to help you make the case for the importance of addressing adult learner needs in your state or region and for the benefits of a campaign to attract adults back into the education system. But it will not always be easy.

2. Avoid the “ready, fire, aim” strategy.

The term “adult learners” covers a diverse group. You will need to aim you campaign carefully before you fire it up if you want to succeed. A recipe for failure is to jump to the media gallery on this site and start slinging ads over the airways before you carefully define and understand your target audience. Your potential targets include one or more of the following groups: each suggesting different campaign approaches.

- a. Young adults who recently dropped out of high school who may or may not be in adult basic education, GED programs, or the workforce
- b. Young or older adults who completed only a high school degree, employed or unemployed
- c. Adults with some college but no postsecondary credential
- d. Adults in the workforce with associate degrees who would benefit from an advanced degree
- e. Adults who nearly completed a baccalaureate but who for some reason dropped out and have been out of school for a time
- f. Adults with college degrees who would benefit from advanced practice

Your decision about which group(s) to target in your campaign will heavily influence how you proceed with each of the steps outlined in this toolkit. The decision about targets should be driven by the work you do during the formative research phase of the campaign when you discover what targets will give you the greatest return on your campaign investment.

3. You think more of your product than your customer does.

Educators, environmentalists, and the like tend to assume their product is an absolute and unquestioned good. Who is not “for” education? Well, many adult learners, especially those at the lower income/education levels are aware of the educational programs available to them but have decided that the return on the investment of the time, money, and effort is not worth it (see *Reasonable Choices: Understanding Why Undereducated Individuals Choose Not to Participate in Adult Education* by Jensen, White, Fletcher, and Goldstein, 2003). Do not assume that the “problem” is lack of awareness of educational programs. That may be true in some cases (your formative research will tell you that), but in all cases your campaign will need to understand and respect the logic of the adult learner and find ways to leverage change in their logic model so that it leads to a different conclusion. In some cases there may be misperceptions (exaggerated estimates of costs) that can be changed. In others, you will need to acknowledge and work around their accurate sense that (a) those good jobs for which education equips you are few and far between where they live or (b) education programs are inflexibly offered at inconvenient times for working adults.

4. Your product is probably defective.

Many states have limited capacity and programs to address the needs of adult learners in either adult basic education/workforce programs or in postsecondary education. In bringing together the partners you need for your campaign you will have the opportunity to evaluate your product and begin to make improvements in it. Still, in most states, you will feel like an advertiser trying to attract customers to a store located in the middle of a highway construction zone and a bad neighborhood. You will need to deal with this reality and work to finish the road and improve the neighborhood along the way. In the meantime the design of your campaign must take these challenges into account.

5. The least glamorous work is the most important work.

The terms “social marketing” and “campaigns” immediately bring memorable television and radio advertisements to mind. Your campaign may eventually include these. However, your resources will be squandered unless you do the difficult behind the scenes formative research required to

- a. Define the correct targets for your campaign (see 1 above)
- b. Understand their psychological/cultural perspective so you can
- c. Identify the benefits and barriers to pursuing education that can motivate or prevent the complex changes in the adult learners’ behavior you seek.

6. You need a map.

No one should embark on a journey to new destination without a good map. (Columbus was lucky!) The map should clearly identify where you are going (campaign goals) and provide markers to assure that you are on track at key points along the way. Define the goals of your campaign clearly and realistically. Create an evaluation plan that provides feedback at each step along the way about whether your strategies are having the planned effect. Be prepared to learn as you go and change as you need to keep on track to success.

7. Without a strong grassroots strategy your campaign will wither.

Successful campaigns that seek the type of complex behavior change required here do not succeed unless the messages they convey are not reinforced by local, grassroots partners. It takes a lot to reorganize your life to go back to school. This is not as simple as “buckling up” in the car. These grassroots partners provide the on-the-ground, day to day support (supplemental information, motivation, rewards, reinforcement) members of your target audience who take the first step need after they call a hot-line, visit an adult learning center or log onto a website. Your media ads, internet marketing, direct mail, efforts can motivate that first step. You must include development of a grassroots infrastructure in your campaign planning to help the adult learner take the second, third, and fourth step necessary for success.

8. Know what you don't know.

The chances are if you are reading this you are in the education business. Educators know a lot that is valuable for an adult learning campaign. They know (or should know) about the strengths and weaknesses of the education product they are selling. They can do the research required to define the target audience. They tend to know less about best practices in social marketing, how to do media buys based on the consumption patterns of the target audience, or how to secure the best deals from media outlets. This is why it is important to partner with a professional vendor, if you have the budget, or create an advisory group who can provide you that expertise cheaply. Pick your vendor or advisory group wisely. Not all advertising and public relations firms are created equal. You need more than a high powered team of creative types who can create an award winning ad.

9. Money isn't everything but it's something.

You can design the campaign you want and engage in fund raising to secure public and private funding to do it or, if you know your budget, you can design your campaign based on what you have. You may start with a budget and realize you need to supplement it with support from new partnerships you strategically create. However you do it, eventually your campaign goals and structure must be defined by what you can do well with the resources you have. Effective campaigns can range from multi-million dollar, multi-year efforts to targeted programs done on the cheap. Do not over promise or overreach with the resources you have. Sometimes a smaller effort that succeeds can be the first step in generating support for the larger campaign you wanted to do all along.

10. Create grown-up campaigns for adult learners.

Almost all of the successful campaigns you will find in the education arena target students in the traditional P-16 pipeline, especially in middle and high school. (One exception is the [GoHigher campaign](#) in the state of Kentucky.) Too few policy and education leaders even recognize that investing in adult learning is a key to state prosperity and national success. But an adult learning campaign will be substantially different from a traditional youth oriented education campaign if for no other reason than that the educational barriers, benefits, pathways, and products differ radically. That is not to say that a campaign cannot find ways to link adult and youth targets in a multi-tracked campaign. For example, a campaign targeting undereducated adults may find opportunities to link to campaign initiatives targeting low-income students since many of the parents of those students are very likely the adults it is trying to reach. However, many educators are so locked into traditional thinking about today's potential college students that it will take constant monitoring to ensure those implementing the campaign (including professional vendors) focus on grown-up strategies to help adult learners succeed. Fortunately, thanks to the recent good work of organizations like the [Lumina Foundation](#), [CAEL](#), [ACE](#), and others, you have access to rich information about today's adult learner. Immerse yourself and your campaign partners in that literature from the outset. It will help you make and maintain the gestalt shift in perspective needed for a successful adult learning campaign.

11. Avoid tunnel vision.

As you design and implement your campaign do not become so immersed in the effort that you do not do the constant environmental scanning that allows you to take advantage of developments in other areas that (a) might help your campaign (e.g., your Governor is invited to become a member of a prestigious national commission focused on workforce shortages that your adult education efforts could help address) or (b) cause you to scale back expectations (budget problems lead to cuts in financial aid programs supporting adult learners while postsecondary tuition rates rise dramatically). Without this scanning, even a well designed campaign can become hopelessly outdated or miss the chance to greatly increase its impact.

12. Leave a legacy.

As you design and implement the campaign consider the legacy you want to leave. Expensive media campaigns will end with ads to be seen again only by alien cultures light years from now when picked up by interstellar monitors. Vendor contracts will end. Money will run out, at least for intermittent periods. However, if you think strategically

- a. Campaign partners can form the basis for a group that provides integrated, ongoing policy reform and promotional efforts in your state to improve the services provided to, and the educational attainment levels of, adult learners.
- b. Media materials can be designed, and talent releases obtained, so that the materials can be reformatted for use by other local, state, regional, or even national groups serving adult learners

- c. Grassroots infrastructures can be designed so that their work at the local level supporting adult learners can be sustained long after the official “campaign” is over
- d. Adult learners touched by the campaign can themselves be mobilized into a powerful force advocating for adult education over the long term.

Armed with these twelve bullets you are ready to forge ahead with your campaign. This website allows you to directly pull down what you need, when you need it, in the design and implementation of your campaign. However, assuming you have made the case for the campaign, you are now ready to do the formative research that is the foundation for a successful campaign.

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