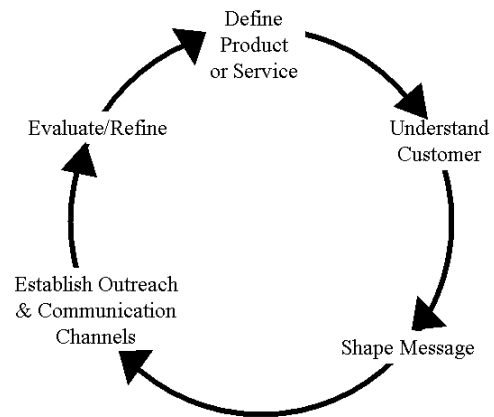


***This article explores marketing and messaging for youth programs, with a particular focus on School to Career/Connecting Activities and related workforce development programs.***

A key part of successful youth program implementation is a positive, thoughtful approach to marketing and messaging. Some youth programs may have a formal strategic marketing plan while others may have a more informal approach. Whether formal or informal, the ideal approach integrates youth development concepts along with marketing practices used by business.

A marketing plan, whether for business or for nonprofit services focuses on five elements. These five elements can be envisioned as a circle or loop, since each element informs the others.

- 1. Define the Product or Service**
- 2. Understand the Customer**
- 3. Shape the Message**
- 4. Establish Outreach/Communication Channels**
- 5. Evaluate/Refine the Marketing Plan**



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### ***(1) Defining the Product or Service***

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Describe the youth workforce development system: What is available in your region, city or town, or school?

What is the range of career-related programs/services available?

What are the specific activities that are available? Examples include:

- Career exploration
- Work-readiness activities;
- Jobs/Internships
- Work-Based Learning Plans
- Job Shadowing
- Teacher Externships
- Career Fairs
- Career Days (healthcare, construction careers, etc.)
- Employer relationships with schools
- Classroom curriculum related to career/workplace topics

What are the points of contact for youth to access these activities and services?

Are there any unifying features that make the youth services system comprehensive and cohesive?

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Discussion: Creating a Cohesive Set of Products / Services

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**Question:** How do youth identify your program(s)?

- What do they call the program?
- If asked to describe the program, what would they say?
- Is there a recognizable program name, physical location, logo or other identifying characteristic? Or is there a key staff person who is the identifying feature?

Typically, high school students tend to personalize activities in their school. Students are more likely to say “Ms. Smith is really helpful” rather than “The School to Career Program is really helpful.” Students also tend not to notice connections among a system of services unless the connections are made clear.

It is worth the effort to create a cohesive system of services, so that students can:

- Experience a logical sequence of career development and work readiness activities;
- Be aware of services available to them;
- Move easily from one service to another;
- Integrate what they have learned in a series of activities rather than seeing each activity as an isolated event.

Many regions, cities/towns or schools have defined points of contact for youth to access a network of, education, training and employment opportunities as well as community service learning and leadership development opportunities, peer networking, and other activities. These points of contact may be: youth resource rooms within the One-Stop Career Centers \* youth career centers \* college and career centers in high schools \* youth centers or other resources in the community \* websites \*other points of contact.

The youth services system may also have unifying features, such as use of consistent college and career planning tools, student portfolios, special events, program listings, event calendars, or other features that bring together several different programs or activities.

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## ***(2) Understanding the Customer***

Who are the customers of the program? What do customers want and need? How does your program address customer goals?

Customers include youth, employers, parents, teachers and the community. For each set of customers:

- What are some of the goals of the customers?
- What are some of the needs that your program can meet?
- What do they want from your program?
- Can you ask customers about their wants and needs?
- Are some of the desired outcomes of your program defined by state-level or national-level program design?

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Discussion: Understanding Customer Goals

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**Question:** What are the common goals and needs of all sets of customers?

***For School to Career/Connecting Activities programs, common goals include:***

- A focus on career development and skill acquisition for youth;
- Partnering with schools to strengthen academic experiences;
- Helping employers to connect with schools and with youth;
- Helping youth to learn about careers and prepare for postsecondary education and training and first jobs;
- Helping to make jobs and internships productive and rich learning experiences with rewards for both youth and employers.

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## ***(3) Shaping a Message***

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What are the key elements of messaging in your program?

Program names  
Logos  
Descriptions  
Visual design – colors, photography, artwork  
Physical design – career centers, resource rooms  
Strategies – peer networking, awards ceremonies, employer recognition, movie nights, parent nights

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Discussion: Youth Development Concepts

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**Question:** How can programs shape a positive approach to marketing and messaging?

Resources to support marketing and messaging include:

- Youth Development” concepts
- “Asset-based” approach
- “People First” language

Youth development theory emphasizes the importance of positive, “asset-based” programming for youth. Rather than focusing on problems or “deficits,” youth programs should focus on providing positive, constructive experiences. Youth should have the opportunity to exercise leadership skills, build relationships with peers and adults, connect with their communities, and make positive contributions in the community and workplace.

According to David Brown of the National Youth Employment Coalition (NYEC), these positive experiences help young people to “develop resiliency and self-efficacy, gain teamwork, problem-solving, and communication skills, and learn how to build and maintain personal and professional networks and support systems.”

Brown states that “youth must be viewed as comprised of assets, not just problems. Programs need to identify young people’s strengths and build on them through educational projects, enrichment activities, and use of outside resources (people and places).”<sup>1</sup>

The language used in youth programming should focus on positive outcomes and personal strengths, rather than problems and barriers. Language is powerful, and can have a direct impact on participant experiences and program success.

- Use “asset-based language” in shaping messaging and marketing. Focus on the assets and strengths that youth bring to the program and not on “deficits” or “prevention” issues.
- Information about program eligibility, target populations, and “risk factors” should always stay “in the background” and should not be part of the marketing and messaging used for the program.
- Issues about program funding, reporting and performance measurement should also be as invisible as possible. When communicating with customers, program staff should focus on the **direct** benefits of each aspect of programming, from intake to follow-up.
- Staff should be familiar with “People First” language and use this approach to language when working with students with disabilities. These concepts may also inform other areas of language, marketing and messaging (see the “Spotlight” features that follow).

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<sup>1</sup> *Advancing Youth Development Under the Workforce Investment Act*, David E. Brown, National Youth Employment Coalition, 1999.

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#### **(4) Defining Channels of Outreach and Communication**

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How do youth, employers, teachers, parents and the community learn about your programs and services?

Posters and signs  
Bulletin boards  
School websites  
Youth program websites  
Outreach tables in cafeteria or lobby  
School parent nights

How are youth involved in promoting the program?  
How are employers involved? How are teachers involved?

School activity fairs  
School newspaper  
Community newspaper  
Classroom presentations  
Peer recruitment

How is technology used to promote youth services?

Through teachers  
Through the school guidance program  
Personal outreach  
School-based college and career center  
Local youth center  
Chamber of commerce presentations  
Other

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#### **(5) Evaluating and Refining a Marketing Strategy**

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Is the marketing strategy conveying a positive, effective message?

Are marketing and outreach messages attractive, available, and youth-friendly and do they convey a positive message?

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*Note: Regions may participate in a formal planning process to define a strategic marketing approach or may gradually shape the approach over time.*

Would an informal poll of youth and employers show that most are aware of opportunities provided by your program?

*In either case, it is important to continually evaluate the outreach and marketing strategies by examining results. Questions to guide this evaluation can include any of the following.*

Would an informal poll of teachers and staff show that most are aware of how to refer youth to your program?

Do programs have sufficient numbers of participants? Are there a variety of youth involved, including a mix of male and female participants, with a diverse mix that reflects the local or regional population?

Is there a base of current and past participants, both employers and youth, who are enthusiastic about referring peers to the program?

## APPENDIX: SPOTLIGHT ON LANGUAGE

### Spotlight on Language: Asset-Based vs. Deficit-Based Approaches

The language used in youth programming should focus on positive outcomes and personal strengths, rather than problems and barriers. Language is powerful, and can have a direct impact on participant experiences and program success.

- Use “asset-based language” in shaping messaging and marketing. Focus on the assets and strengths that youth bring to the program and not on “deficits” or “prevention” issues.
- Information about program eligibility, “risk factors” and performance measurement should always stay “in the background” and should not be part of the marketing and messaging used for the program.

#### ***Instead of...***

Summer jobs are essential for crime prevention.

We need to find more summer jobs for at-risk youth.

The program seeks to reduce dropout rates.

The plan addresses the students’ barriers to success.

“MCAS” student  
“Level 1” student  
“WIA” youth or “non-WIA” youth  
“At risk” student

#### ***Consider...***

Through the summer jobs program, youth have an opportunity to contribute to the community.

Youth from our community are seeking summer jobs.

The program helps students to prepare for graduation.

Through this program, students become more engaged with school.

The program seeks to increase graduation rates.

Students use the plan to set goals.

Students use the plan to develop problem-solving strategies.

[no substitute – instead – keep language about program targeting, program eligibility and risk factors out of program messaging and marketing]

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## Spotlight on Language: “People First” Language for Students with Disabilities

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Over the past two decades, the concept of “People First” language has emerged in the community of individuals with disabilities.

The concept is simple. Language should focus on the **person first** before anything else, including any disability or medical condition. Using “People First” language, one says “a student who has a disability,” focusing on the person first, rather than using labels like “disabled student,” “the disabled,” “handicapped” or “SPED student.”

People First language also avoids negative words that suggest tragedy, such as “afflicted with,” “suffers from,” or “victim of.” It also avoids using a disability or condition to define what a person “is.” A person simply “has” a disability or medical condition.

“People First” language focuses on supports and accessibility rather than on disability. For example, instead of “he cannot use a pencil” it is more helpful to say that “he writes with a computer.” Instead of “he is non-verbal” it is more useful to say “he uses a communication device.” Instead of “he can’t walk” it is more useful to say “he uses a power wheelchair.”

People First language also suggests avoiding euphemisms (such as “differently-abled” or “physically challenged”).

“People First” language also suggests that there are many occasions where it is not necessary to refer to a disability at all. Unless a conversation is focused on medical or educational needs, accommodations or supports needed in employment, or other topics related to a disability, it is not necessary to identify the person through their disability.<sup>2</sup>

Why is this relevant to marketing and messaging for youth programs? There are two reasons.

1. Youth programs serve students with disabilities alongside students who do not have disabilities. Youth program staff should seek to become familiar with “People First” language in order to communicate effectively with students, staff and the community. (See the footnotes below for two online articles that are helpful.)
2. The concept of “People First” language provides insight that may be applied to the overall marketing and messaging strategies of youth programming. Key concepts are that “language is powerful” and that simple changes in language can shape a more positive message. While there isn’t an “exact match” between People First language and the language for marketing youth programs, the following concepts may be helpful:
  - Avoid labeling individuals (such as “at risk”).
  - Also avoid substitutes for labels, since these are quickly recognized as labels.
  - Avoid program names that subtly or not-so-subtly label participants.
  - Develop language that focuses on the person rather than the program.
  - Focus on assets rather than problems.

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<sup>2</sup> Kathie Snow, People First Language, <http://disabilityisnatural.com>.

Texas Council for Developmental Disabilities, People First Language, <http://www.txddc.state.tx.us/resources/publications/pflanguage.asp>.