

## ABSTRACT

# Strategic marketing for workplace education programs

by Judi Taylor-Dunn and Jane McGovern

This article gives a detailed account of how the Center for Literacy in Philadelphia was able to serve 13 companies and gross over \$50,000 in revenue in one fiscal year through PA WIN and fee-for-service contracts. By using the tools that the Small Business Administration and the Women's Business Center provides on their Web sites, CFL was able to implement a strategic marketing plan that could be replicated by other agencies in Pennsylvania.

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In one year, the Center for Literacy, Inc. served 13 companies in the Philadelphia region using PA Workforce Improvement Network (PA WIN) and fee-for-service dollars totaling over \$50,000. Many literacy providers have made comments about our ability to sell. The truth of the matter is that we did not “sell” anything. We created a strategic marketing plan following the recommendations on the Small Business Administration’s Web site ([www.sba.gov](http://www.sba.gov)) and the Women’s Business Center ([www.onlinewbc.gov](http://www.onlinewbc.gov)). In general, we treated the Workforce Performance Division like a new start-up company ... and it worked.

The first step was to educate ourselves. Those two Web sites as well as *The Philadelphia Business Journal*, the business section of *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, and other business-related periodicals and Web sites helped us to accomplish that goal. We needed to know the concerns of businesses in our area. We needed to understand the role of government in attracting businesses in the Philadelphia region and helping them to grow. We also needed to learn the language of business, so we could effectively communicate with business professionals, which would help to increase our confidence levels.

Following the outline provided by the Women’s Business Center, we had to take stock of our current situation. Our agency had a 14-year track record of providing workforce programs. Two people on staff were still involved with the program. One was a teacher (Jane), and the other signed time sheets (Judi). Neither had actively participated in securing new contracts. We went through old workforce files to research the types of trainings that had been done in the past, the types of companies we had served, and the outcomes of each contract. What we discovered was that we rarely had repeat business, very few companies paid for training, and most of the companies were manufacturers.

We also listed our competitors in the education business, which included for-profit companies and nonprofit agencies. We researched their offerings, prices, and markets. We met with a few competitors to discuss forming alliances. To our surprise, people were very open to working together and making referrals. Through our conversations, we discovered that we had a niche and that niche was not based on the work we had done in the past with workforce education programming; rather, it was based on the agency’s experience working with “at-risk” populations in the areas of reading, writing, math, and ESL instruction. In addition, many of our competitors did not work with small to mid-size companies, nonprofits, or entry-level employees.

So now we had taken stock of who we are as an agency, what we bring as individuals, and who our competitors are. The next step was to create marketing objectives, which included a timeframe for accomplishing each objective. Our objectives were: 1) to increase awareness of

our services within the workforce development community; 2) to create an image of professionalism and a reputation of quality; and 3) to cover all direct and indirect costs associated with this project. All three objectives had to be accomplished by May 1.

### Creating a strategy

Now it was time for the important step of creating a marketing strategy. Marketing is not sales. The American Marketing Association defines marketing as “the process of planning and executing the conception, pricing, promotion, and distribution of goods and services to create exchanges that satisfy individual and organizational objectives.” In other words, it is the right product or service, for the right price, using an effective promotional strategy or sales technique, and delivered in the right place.

Our product/service was 12–16 hours of customized foundation skills training that included professionally developed materials that the company and learner could use as an ongoing resource.

Our pricing was calculated by determining the amount of money we needed to make to cover the salaries of the staff members assigned to the department divided by the number of months we had to accomplish the goal. In our case, we needed to make \$30,000 in 10 months to break even. That breaks down to \$3,000 per month. Through PA WIN, we could receive up to \$200 per learner. Next, we divided the \$3,000 by \$200, which let us know that we had to serve a minimum of 15 new learners each month to break even. These figures did not include fee-for-service contracts, which we saw as gravy.

### Getting the word out

We promoted our service by meeting with various representatives of the workforce development community in Philadelphia to let them know about PA WIN and its connection to the region’s workforce development strategy. We met with CareerLink officials and representatives from the Workforce Investment Board, the Philadelphia Workforce Development Corporation (PWDC), Community College of Philadelphia, and Philadelphia Industrial Development Corporation (PIDC).

The final part of the strategy was to determine where the service was going to be delivered and how it would be sold. Determining delivery was easy because it occurs at the employer’s location. The sales technique was to present the training service as part of a solution to the company’s problem. We decided that we would try to get referrals from the workforce development community and through other CFL partners. We also shared information with the rest of CFL’s staff and encouraged them to share with the people they knew.

To our surprise, it worked! Most of the companies we served were referrals from others, including PWDC, PIDC, and CFL staff members. Most of the contracts were with manufacturers and non-profits, and the companies were all small to mid-size businesses. Several of the PA WIN contracts turned into fee-for-service contracts or became a part of our distance-learning program. Most of all, we were able to demonstrate that PA WIN works and that a little strategic planning can go a long way.