

Gold Medallion 2010 Entry

Making My Way, Peel District School Board

Research

Peel District School Board is one of Canada's largest public school boards with more than 153,000 students in 236 schools. We serve 1.3 million residents in three municipalities immediately west of Toronto. About half of our new registrants are new to Canada in the past three years, and more than 90 per cent of these newcomer families do not speak or read English as a first language. According to our database, only 47 per cent of our *total* student population speaks English at home—the other 53 per cent speak a language other than English.¹

The Peel board launched an initiative called *Making My Way – success for all students*, to increase the overall high school graduation rate and prepare students for the future labour market.

The Peel board communications team was part of the educator team developing the operational program to respond to the government legislation/directives. When the project began, the educators on the team thought the communication plan would focus mainly on parents, and to a lesser extent staff. They saw no need for audience research and were anxious to begin producing communication products.

We convinced the team that we needed to conduct research to answer questions such as the following:

- How do teenagers in Peel make decisions about their career paths?
- How much do they, their parents, and their teachers know about potential destinations after secondary school?
- What value do they attach to the various destinations?

To begin answering these and other related questions, we surveyed students, parents and educators in 22 middle and secondary schools. There was representation from each of the three municipalities we serve.

Here are some of main findings² about each of our main audiences for the campaign.

Teens (students in grade 8 to 12)

- The main factor influencing teens' decisions about post-secondary career path is their own interests and abilities.
- Their preferred method of receiving information on this topic is the web, but they also want to hear directly from people in various careers.
- Teens indicate a preference for university, but are willing to consider post-secondary paths such as apprenticeship, if they can see how it fits with their interests.

Parents/Guardians

- University is highly valued as a destination by most parents. Their views and values about university as the preferred choice were very strongly entrenched.
- Parents also prefer the web as an information source, but many also want more direct, personal contact with the school system.

Educators

- Teachers overestimate the influence that students' families have on their career decisions.
- They support the overall initiative, but need more information and resources.

Based on the survey results, we completely changed the planned focus on the campaign. The name "*Making My Way*" and the look-and-feel of the campaign became directly targeted to teens, rather than to teachers and parents. Instead of thinking about the campaign from the perspective of the adults, we looked at a campaign that first speaks directly to teens, and second provides supporting materials to their parents and teachers.

Newcomer parents

Working with a researcher in the Peel board research department, we trained some of the settlement workers who work directly in schools with newcomer parents to facilitate focus groups on this topic in parents' first language. The main finding of the newcomer parent focus groups was that, in the absence of information, newcomers erroneously assume that post-secondary pathways and the labour market work the same in Canada as in their country of origin. They were also more desirous of face-to-face communication than Canadian-born parents. Based on these findings, a special strategy was developed for these parents.

¹ Student Information System, Peel District School Board. Oct. 2009

² *Making My Way: Student, Parent/Guardian, Educator Perceptions, Final Report*. Nov. 2009

Focus groups

Focus groups were also conducted with educators, students and English-speaking parents. The purpose of the focus groups was to probe into the issues and trends identified in the survey. We have been using the focus group results to continue refining the communication approach and materials to better meet each audience's perceptions, attitudes and information needs.

Planning

Desired outcome:

The secondary school graduation rate for the Peel District school Board is increased to 85 per cent by 2010.

Objectives:

The communications plan objective is to motivate students to obtain requirements for graduation by:

- increasing stakeholder awareness of the post-secondary destinations, and the merits of each (apprenticeship, college, university, workplace training)
- motivating students to start thinking about post-secondary destinations as early as grade 7
- increasing parent understanding of career-life planning and the resources available to assist teens in choosing post-secondary pathways

Execution

- ***www.makingmyway.ca*** – The website is a quick way to access essential career-life planning resources.
- ***"Profiles in success"*** – In the research, teens indicated that they wanted to hear directly from people working in various careers. To communicate the message that success is defined by each individual, the campaign features Peel board grads who are in the early- to mid-20s, working in different sectors. The videos are featured on www.makingmyway.ca, on the *Making My Way* YouTube channel and on local cable TV. We also provided schools with DVD copies of the video clips to use during assemblies, in career education classes, etc. These grads are also featured in a poster series.
- ***Toolkit for schools***
- ***Presentation for students in grades 7 and 8*** – Special presentations were created for grade 7 and grade 8. The script for each presentation was written for the age group and a professional teen actor recorded the voice-over. These presentations are used in all middle schools in grade 7 and 8. They're also available on the website.
- ***Where are you headed*** brochure for students in grade 8 to 11 to help them choose high school courses.
- ***Multi-lingual parent information sessions*** – We have presented 30 workshops to parents in eight languages so far. The parent articles will be repurposed on the Peel board multi-lingual websites in all 38 languages, to reach parents who cannot attend the sessions.
- ***"Jobs of the future" fact sheet*** – To help students and parents understand future labour market trends, this labour market summary has been one of the most popular items in the *Making My Way* campaign.

Evaluation

- The *Making My Way* communication campaign has helped to support an increase of four per cent in the Peel board's graduation rate, over the three years of the campaign, from 78 to 83 per cent.
- There were more than 26,000 website visitors from Sept. 1, 2008 to Aug. 31, 2009. Peak usage of the website was from early January to mid-February, when students are choosing high school courses—more than 400 visits daily.
- Student focus groups of **makingmyway.ca** were held in April-May 2009. We have developed a social media plan for the 2009-10 school year in response to this feedback.
- More than 700 parents attended one of 30 *Making My Way* sessions in one of eight languages.
 - 95 per cent stated that they would be able to better help their teen with career-life planning after attending the session.
- A follow-up survey with middle and secondary school teachers provided the following findings:
 - 85 per cent agree or strongly agree that "the *Making My Way* communication materials are effective in helping me understand and communicate the initiative to my colleagues, students and parents."
 - 86 per cent agree that the campaign effectively communicates the message that all pathways are of value.
 - 92 per cent say the look and feel of the *Making My Way* material appeals to students.