



A Message THAT MATTERS

The banners at the Arlington Career Center represent the county's high schools, all of which receive the message about the value of career and technical education through the career center's marketing efforts.

GETTING OUT THE MESSAGE ABOUT CAREER AND TECHNICAL EDUCATION IS A VITALLY IMPORTANT MISSION THAT SCHOOLS ARE ACCOMPLISHING THROUGH MYRIAD MARKETING TECHNIQUES.

By Susan Reese

Susan Reese

is a *Techniques* contributing editor. She can be contacted at susan@printmanagementinc.com.

Across the country, a number of career tech schools are employing marketing strategies to make their communities aware of the benefits of career and technical education.

One of these schools, the Arlington Career Center (ACC) in Arlington, Virginia, is using a strategy that is effective on a number of levels. A series of posters is providing information on the career center and its programs, but what makes the posters such an effective marketing tool is that they are more than simply informational. The posters are artistic and eye-catching, and each one spotlights an individual student success story—a success story that is due in large part to the experience the student had at the career center. The stories are compelling and demonstrate not only the skills the students acquire through career and technical education, but the inspiration such an education provides as well.

The posters are the result of collaboration between commercial arts teacher Mike Lahr and digital photography teacher Bruce Fleischer and were recently displayed at Ballston Common Mall, a busy Arlington shopping mall. The display gave the community the opportunity to read about what students are actually learning in today's career and technical education programs—and where that education is taking them.

ACC Principal Jerry Caputo says, "We are not the vocational institution of the past. We want parents to know that we are developing career pathways to two- and four-year postsecondary institutions, as well as providing students with good skills sets to meet industry needs."

Caputo describes the articulation with Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA) as very strong and adds that the career center is now a testing center for

NOVA entrance exams. They are also moving toward dual enrollment in NOVA and ACC classes.

The ACC career and technical programs are divided into three divisions and eight career clusters. The business and communication division includes commercial art and media, business and marketing, and information technology. The industry and engineering division encompasses transportation, construction trades, and engineering and leadership. The health and human services division includes biology and biotechnology, health and public safety, and human services.

ACC's marketing message emphasizes "four opportunities":

- to master marketplace skills or competencies;
- to achieve industry certifications such as NOCTI and AYES, and licensure in fields such as emergency medical technician and cosmetology;
- to gain college credits through articulation agreements with NOVA and other colleges and universities; and
- to participate in career experiences that include internships, job mentoring, student enterprise and competitions.

With so much to offer the students of Arlington County, it is important to get the message out. "See-for-Yourself Tours" are given to county ninth-graders as well as to guidance counselors, academic coordinators, community leaders and international educators. The tour groups visit each of the classes, and the student ambassadors—a cadre of about 100 outstanding students—familiarize visitors with their experiences in various programs.

Sending the Message Early

Sue Klett, student enterprise coordinator at ACC, notes the importance of marketing the career and technical program to middle school students and says they try to talk to all of the county's eighth-graders.

"The career center stages assemblies at each middle school," says Klett. "The student ambassadors go to the middle school assemblies and talk kids-to-kids."

David Welsh, a TV production teacher and

special projects coordinator, has produced a marketing slide show aimed at students, which features student-written-and-produced videos. The videos are surprisingly sophisticated and technically impressive, so they work well in grabbing the attention of the younger students.

The career center appeals to even younger students through its enrichment classes, in which students in grades three through five can enroll to attend on early release days and in summer camp programs where they learn things such as pet care. The animal science program has a number of effective ambassadors of its own, among them dogs, cats, birds, goats and even a miniature horse. Since Arlington, just across the Potomac River from Washington, D.C., is an urban county, the miniature horse has quite an impact on the young students.

The early childhood education program at ACC includes a preschool and daycare for teen mothers. Since the career center is next door to Patrick Henry Elementary School, students in the early childhood education program also go to the elementary school to help out—and some of them have gone on to become teachers themselves. The young students who have the opportunity to take enrichment classes at the career center, as well as the students from Patrick Henry Elementary School, remember their earlier experiences, and these students sometimes come back to ACC six, seven or even eight years later, ready for higher-level career experiences, according to Klett.

Other divisions at the school do things that promote the career center to the



The posters in the lobby of the Arlington Career Center (above) were also displayed in the Ballston Common Mall, a busy Arlington shopping mall. The posters share success stories of career center students.



PHOTOS THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE, BILL REESE

community. The culinary arts program does catering, and the TV production class has produced two documentary films on the challenges facing urban teens that were shown in local theaters. Students from HVACR recently helped the new Washington Capitals Ice Center in Arlington create ice for their public and professional practice ice rinks. The teacher of the emergency medical technician program has a fire truck, which becomes the “limo” to the prom for the student in the class with the top GPA. Students can also earn the privilege of being picked up by the fire truck from their home schools, along with four of their friends—all of which attracts positive attention.

Hitting the Target

While other marketing efforts at ACC, such as attending elective fairs at each high school, are directed to students, Klett stresses

the importance of going “directly to the target market”—and that means the parents.

“We invite the parents of all students in the eighth, ninth and 10th grades to an information night,” explains Klett. “The teachers volunteer their time, and parents of graduates even come back to share with the other parents.”

As part of the parent-student information night, there are 18 breakout sessions, and attendees can choose three to attend. It is probably not an easy decision to make, since the breakout sessions include such interesting options as forensics/biology, TV/multimedia productions, animal science, engineering/aviation, and physical therapy/sports medicine. The breakouts are designed to attract students who are looking for an alternative to traditional academic school offerings—classes that pique their curiosity and offer the opportunity to explore their talents and interests. By filling out

BRANDING



Almost everyone in this country recognizes the Nike swoosh and the marketing phrase, “Just do it.” The genius in both the logo and the slogan is their simplicity. Career and technical education is a lot more complicated than an athletic shoe—and a lot more valuable—so it takes a more complicated form of branding.

Lake Area Technical Institute in Watertown, South Dakota, has been able to achieve this type of branding, says LuAnn Strait. As the director of institutional relations at Lake Area Tech, her responsibilities include marketing, admissions, student services and recruiting.

According to Strait, the school’s logo is recognized all across the region by a large number of people. The Lake Area Tech theme is “Experience a Life-Changing Event,” and Strait impresses upon everyone at the school—from faculty to support staff—how important it is to “eat, drink, sleep and live” that theme.

“Sometimes we play off those words in our advertising,” says Strait, “but I want to make sure our slogan, logo, address, phone number and Web site are on everything that goes out—and that we tie it into our theme. It’s somewhat of an internal joke, but I watch the promotional materials on this campus like a hawk to make sure everything we release is sending the message we want out there.”

The school has kept the theme for a number of years, and Strait believes that, “Consistency is important. That’s how people recognize you—by your look, your style and your sound.” As she explains, “Branding is always being consistent. Develop your message, tell the world, and eventually it will work.”

It helps that the school has a logo that Strait describes as “ageless.” The front of the school is also graced by a globe created by the school’s welding students, and she notes that the globe is used as a background on almost everything. Not only is it beautiful as a work of art, but it ties in well to the school’s role in training students for the global marketplace.

According to Nigel Markwick, a senior consultant with the international brand consultancy firm Wolff Olins, branding in education is about “engaging audiences in a dialogue about what makes your organization special and how that relates to them in a very specific way.”

Lake Area Technical Institute has established itself as something special, and in a community of only about 20,000 people, the school has an enrollment of approximately 1,200 students and 24 different programs of study.

“We are the pride of the community,” Strait says. That is another kind of brand—one that this school has worked hard to earn.

evaluation forms, the attendees can receive information after the event on other programs they might be interested in. The evaluation forms give ACC teachers the opportunity to follow up with interested parents as well.

Completed evaluation forms are also entered into a raffle, with prizes such as a manicure, a dog wash, an oil change, a photo, a reconditioned computer, and a blood pressure check and strength analysis. These services are performed for the raffle winners by ACC students under the supervision of the teachers.

"It's another way to get them back in the building," notes Klett. Seeing the students put their skills to use can also serve as another way to sell the career center's programs.

Klett says that, "Many parents have not been exposed to how our programs can fit into a career pathway for their students."

When the community residents went to Ballston Common Mall and saw the posters of their local career center students and read the stories of success, perhaps the picture of career and technical education as a part of lifelong education became a lot clearer.

Selling Our Success

The mission of the Butler County Area Vocational-Technical School (AVTS) is "to empower students with the skills necessary for continuous development, education and employment," and while that is a noble mission, if no one knows about it, it is in danger of failing. Fortunately, the school's marketing efforts are ensuring that does not happen. Seven area school districts are affiliated with Butler AVTS, so students can attend from the Butler, Karns City, Mars, Moniteau, Seneca Valley, Slippery Rock and South Butler County school districts. The school also admits home-schooled, private-schooled and cyber-schooled students with permission from the district's superintendent.

Butler County AVTS presents informational seminars in each district to students eligible to attend during the next school year prior to student scheduling. According to Joyce Holzhauser, the guidance counselor at Butler County AVTS, these seminars may be to either large or small groups, and during the seminars, each career and technical education program is pictured through PowerPoint as it is explained.

"We have a school/program 'view book' that each student receives," says Holzhauser. "This year we are adding a mini-movie DVD that each student will receive."

Technimedia Studios in Jewett, Ohio, produced the DVD, which will result in a television commercial as well as radio commercials, both of which, notes Holzhauser, have been done in past years.



These are two of the Arlington Career Center's best "marketing tools" for appealing to younger students.

Movie theater still commercials are another method that has been utilized by the school.

Butler County AVTS also uses billboard advertising and advertises on place mats used at local restaurants. Pens, magnets, lanyards and coffee mugs are among the promotional items that have been emblazoned with the school's name and logo.

"I think that, although the product name is out there, what each student who leaves our facility says about us is advertising we cannot control," says Holzhauser. "Living up to the promise we make is the most important advertising we can do."

The school's director, Joseph Cunningham, says that, "The gist of what we try to promote is changing the image of what career and technical education is about."

They are getting the word out about the advanced standing and credits toward postsecondary education earned by their students. By bringing in occupational advisory committees, the school has built support from the workforce investment board and other community organizations. All of these efforts are paying off, and Cunningham says, "The pendulum is starting to swing. Parents are beginning to see that we serve both academic and technical students."

Just as at the ACC, Cunningham notes that, "A lot of our advertising has to do with the accomplishments of our students."

The message that career and technical education has to share is much too valuable to keep to ourselves. We have so many great stories of student success to tell, and the marketing tools being employed by schools such as Butler County AVTS and the Arlington Career Center are important in telling our stories. ■

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