
Case Studies | Consumer Marketing

Client

Appalachian State University,
Office of Extension and Distance Education
Western North Carolina

Objective

Appalachian State University's beautiful mountain campus in Boone, North Carolina, boasted a 2009 enrollment of 15,000 students – the maximum the on-campus infrastructure will support. But, applications for enrollment continue to rise at ASU, which for nearly a quarter-century has consistently ranked as one of the top 15 southern regional universities.

The limits of the Boone campus and the growing demand for enrollment have come together to make distance learning programs a tremendous growth opportunity for the university. Now, full- and part-time distance education is available at 18 physical locations in 10 western North Carolina counties. In addition, degree programs are offered online within a 50-mile radius of Boone. Flagship off-site locations are Appalachian State University Centers in Hickory, Hudson and Morganton, North Carolina. These centers comprise the Appalachian State University Greater Hickory Partnership.

Appalachian asked Gotham to produce an executable plan to attract, retain and graduate prospective off-campus students. The plan was to target prospects who are graduating from high school, or who hold associate's degrees. Appalachian also asked Gotham to produce branded deliverables promoting their distance learning programs across the 10-county region.

The goal was to:

1. Raise awareness in western North Carolina that Appalachian offers off- campus programming at the Appalachian's Greater Hickory Partnership centers.
2. Increase by 50 percent the number of students in both off-site and online programming.
3. Make prospective students and communities aware of the new partnership among Appalachian, Western Piedmont College, Caldwell Community College and Technical Institute, Catawba Valley Community College and the North Carolina Center for Engineering Technologies.
4. Generate a strategic marketing plan for the Greater Hickory Partnership to serve a broader purpose across the larger 10-county Appalachian Learning Alliance.

Challenge

The Appalachian State University Greater Hickory Partnership (ASUGHP) was a new entity, but Gotham had considerable experience with marketing secondary education in

western North Carolina, having worked with the Hickory Metro Higher Education Center (ASUGHP's predecessor) for five of its six years. Appalachian's past efforts to promote distance education were largely piecemeal, this resulted in weak brand cohesion or identity. Compounding the challenge, state cuts limited the marketing budget for this initiative, so highly focused messaging and delivery were crucial.

Solution

Gotham interviewed all key stakeholders at the ASU Greater Hickory Partnership and leveraged the information with past data collected from the Hickory Metro Higher Education Center, using the input to create a comprehensive strategic marketing plan. The plan included messaging strategy and suggested deliverables including newspaper ads, multimedia presentations, radio ads, billboard, print brochures and specialty advertising. Non-traditional media utilized for promotion include Google Pay-Per-Click, Search Engine Optimization, local cinema, and mall advertising.

Results

To jump-start public awareness of the initiative, the campaign launched with a series of billboards on major interstate highways. The billboards rotate the core messages – Appalachian is Available, Affordable and Attainable – with board locations and messaging changing monthly. Supporting the billboard campaign are print and radio initiatives across the target market. Customized packets for high schools and community colleges will contain USBs with testimonial videos and pertinent print brochures. Microsites appealing to the target demographic will allow Appalachian to accurately measure the results of these efforts through Google Analytics.

According to the ASU GHP Director, Gotham's campaign has been highly successful in accomplishing its goals. Since the campaign rolled out in early February 2010, foot traffic and phone calls have increased dramatically in the Appalachian State University Greater Hickory Partnership, and web traffic has risen 100 percent. Perhaps more importantly, prospective students are more aware of the specific Appalachian programs offered in the region, are more likely to strongly consider applying to an Appalachian off-campus program and are more academically organized when they visit a center. The result was substantially increased brand awareness, which led to a tripling of enrollment from 2004-2008.