Recruitment: Lessons Learned and Strategies for 2022

Aly Ferguson and Jonas Kane
Service Year Alliance
Opening Reflections

1. What was your most successful recruitment strategy this past year?

2. What’s been your biggest recruitment challenge?

3. What’s one goal you have for recruitment over the next year?
Presenters

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To make a year of paid, full-time service — a service year — a common expectation and opportunity for all young Americans.

**OUR MISSION**

**Our 3 Goals**

**EXPANSION:**
Build support from external stakeholders to make the recent expansions of national service successful in a new era.

**RECRUITMENT:**
Bring the next generation of youth into national service, modernize their experience using ServiceYear.org, and align the field around shared recruitment efforts and systems.

**IMPACT:**
Foster collaborative approaches to demonstrate the impact of service years by lifting up exemplary programs and communities.
Agenda

• Overview: Paid Social Media Advertising
• Learnings from High School Transitions project
• Discussion: Social media and reaching your audience
• Learnings from Climate + Service Years project
• Discussion: Messaging your opportunities
• Reflection and Closing
Opening Reflections

1. What was your most successful recruitment strategy this past year?

2. What’s been your biggest recruitment challenge?

3. What’s one goal you have for recruitment over the next year?
Why use paid social media advertising?
Why Paid Social Media Advertising?

• Organic reach is declining
  – Average organic reach for a Facebook post is about 5.5% of your followers - even less for brands with large followings
• More effective audience targeting
  – 99% of 18-28 year olds use social media
• Better data
• Less expensive than other forms of advertising

Source: Hootsuite, 2021
How to Prepare for a Paid Social Media Campaign

- Determine an objective (i.e. reach/impressions, lead generation, clicks, landing page views, conversions/applications)
- Identify your audience(s)
- Set a budget
- Determine timing
- Choose your platform(s) (i.e. Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube, TikTok, Twitch, LinkedIn)
- Nail down your messaging
- Choose creative (i.e. images and/or videos)
- Have a plan for tracking in place (i.e. tracking links, pixels, Google Analytics)
- You’re ready!
ServiceYear.org

- ServiceYear.org is a state-of-the-art marketplace and resource hub that connects young people interested in doing a service year with paid service year opportunities.

- Service Year Alliance launched a paid national recruitment and awareness campaign to raise awareness for service year programs (like AmeriCorps and Peace Corps) on social media in 2017 and has continued to refine and develop campaign concepts based on new learnings and marketplace needs.
High School Transitions:

Recruitment Pilot, Focus Group, and Partner Feedback
Goals of Digital Recruitment Pilot

• Overall Goals:
  – Learn how best to recruit recent high school graduates into service years
  – Better understand how to recruit younger, more diverse audiences, including reaching both high school grads and GED recipients

• Tactics and Timing:
  – Service Year Alliance engaged Precision, a digital firm with experience in issue campaigns & national service, to run a digital pilot from August through October 2021
  – This pilot launched new ad concepts on Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat, and included testing different messages, creative, and tactics in reaching the intended audience.
  – Ad performance was measured both in success at building awareness, as well as in ability to drive applications to open service year opportunities on ServiceYear.org, including to a high school focused landing page we created in consultation with a learning cohort of programs focused on recruiting more high school grads into service years
Learnings: Message Testing

• Better You/Greater Us Message Frame:
  – This pilot reinforced a core element of Service Year Alliance’s past research and message testing for all audiences. When marketing to recent high school grads—now part of Gen Z— it is important to highlight the dual concept that service years provide professional growth/benefits as well as make a community impact. Ads that only focused on personal or professional growth were not as successful.

• Authenticity is key for Gen Z:
  – Respect this audience. Be clear about what the opportunity offers and involves, and consider ways to offer opportunities to ask questions to earn trust. Also acknowledge that they’re making a big life decision on what to do after graduation.
Learnings: Message Testing

• **Timely and Relevant Messages:**
  – It is valuable to acknowledge the moment that this audience is living in and reach them with timely and relevant messages.

• **Urgency:**
  – Timebound messaging is effective and creates a sense of urgency to apply. You can drive actions by using words like: “Today, Now, Don’t miss out”

• **Action-Oriented Images and Videos:**
  – Visuals provided in ads should answer “What will I be doing if I join?” Ads should also utilize images that are warm and playful to be more inviting.
Learnings: Best Performing Ads

Facebook & Instagram
Learnings: Best Performing Ads
Snapchat
Learnings: Digital Tactics

• **Timing:**
  - Be thoughtful about timing and when to message to high school students.
    - High school seniors (ages 17 & 18) should be targeted with content optimizing for applications between August and January, before they commit to post-grad plans.
    - High school juniors (ages 16 & 17) should be targeted with content that raises awareness and drives registrations between February and July to prime them to apply the following August-January.

• **Platforms:**
  - Facebook/Instagram: Facebook was most effective at driving applications in this pilot. Instagram was better than Facebook for awareness, but was less effective than Facebook at delivering applications.
  - Snapchat: Snapchat was incredibly effective for raising awareness but not for applications.

• **Remarketing:**
  - Getting service years in front of people, especially younger audiences, more than once is critical to building awareness of the concept and moving people from interested to application.
Audience Recommendations

Strategically using lookalike audiences allows us to reach more diverse audiences or people interested in specific issue areas. Lookalike audiences allow you to leverage audiences already engaging with you to reach greater audiences. We used a lookalike audience of our recent applicants in this pilot campaign, but there are additional ways to leverage this audience technique:

- **Diversity** - Using a lookalike audience of all registrants could constrain your push for diversity since you’ll be targeting people who ‘look like’ those already in your list. However, you can create a lookalike audience based on diverse personnel already participating in service years and create a lookalike of that audience instead.

- **Interest Segmentation** - Another tool is to leverage the types of service years participants do. You can create lookalike audiences for education, environmental, etc. groups based on the participants currently engaging in those programs. This allows you to reach an audience that is tailor-made to be interested in your programs.
Focus Group Insights

- Service Year Alliance worked with Strategies 360 to conduct a qualitative focus group to gather insights into motivations and barriers to doing a service year after high school.

- The focus group ran from March 1 to March 3, 2022 and included 24 16-19 year olds, offering a range of perspectives from high school students and individuals who had recently graduated or received a GED.
Focus Group Insights

• Young people are not entirely set in their career pathway or future goals — there is a lot of room for more information and persuasion.

• Service years need to be viewed as a viable option vs more traditional/known pathways:
  – Financial benefits need to be clear up front.
  – Establishing a sense of community and a support system for corps members is an essential factor to considering a service year.
  – Terminology needs to be simple and relatable.
  – It needs to be clear what sets service years apart from other job opportunities (e.g. skill development and training).
  – Influence of family and friends in making decisions.

• Availability of opportunities close to home is especially important for this age range.
Learning Cohort Insights — What’s Working

- Personal connections and word of mouth
  - Siblings/friends of corps members
  - Mentor/mentee relationships with high school students/recruiting in schools where corps members serve
  - Engaging alums in targeted recruitment as ambassadors
- Calling/texting students as a follow up strategy
- Connections with local youth serving programs and high schools
  - Leading brief presentations in classes/other venues, both in-person and virtual
- Promoting educational pathways and service year supports
  - Education award, higher ed partnerships/ed award match
Learning Cohort Insights — Not Working or Mixed Results

● College and career recruitment fairs (virtual and in-person)
  ○ “It seems that high school students choose to attend the sessions at these events that align with their preconceived ideas about what they want to do after high school, so we aren't able to tap that audience that doesn't yet know about AmeriCorps or the benefit of a service year.”

● Job boards - Sometimes helpful and yield high numbers, but not always the most engaged candidates
Small Group Discussion
Discussion

Reaching Target Audiences + Social Media

1. Who are the main audiences you’re trying to reach through digital and in-person tactics?

2. What social media and virtual platforms are you using to recruit?

3. What tactics are working well? Where are you hitting barriers trying to recruit and raise awareness on social media and virtual platforms?
Climate + Service Years
Poll, Message Testing, and Focus Group
Timeline for Polling & Message Testing

January 2022:
- **Polling:** Conducted a quantitative poll of 18-28 year olds to understand young people’s attitudes towards the Civilian Climate Corps and climate-related service years

February-March 2022:
- **Social Media Message Testing:** Drafted and began testing new climate messaging via social media ad campaigns targeting 18-28 year olds
- **Focus Group Message Testing:** Coordinated a qualitative focus group of 16-26 year olds to gather additional insights into poll results, feedback on messaging and campaign concepts, and overall learnings on recruitment for service years.
Poll Background and Results
Goal: Understand young people’s attitudes towards the CCC, workforce development, and climate service years

- Conducted by Data for Progress
- January 21-26, 2022
- Respondents:
  - 711 people
  - Ages 18-28
  - An oversample of:
    - Black and Latino respondents
    - 18-21-year-olds
    - Representative samples of urban, suburban, and rural voters
Topline Findings

- 65% of young people care about climate change but are not sure what they can do personally to make a difference.
- 45% of young people say they would “strongly” or “maybe” consider doing a service year.
- 72% of young people support the Civilian Climate Corps as proposed by Congress and the White House.
- 38% of young people say they would ‘strongly’ or ‘maybe’ consider joining the CCC.
Nearly half of young people would consider a service year

- **45%** of young people say they would “strongly” or “maybe” consider doing a service year

- **33%** of people also identify as “fifty-fifty”

### Nearly Half of Young People Would Consider Participating in a Service Year

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Young people widely support the CCC

- **72%** of young people support the Civilian Climate Corps as proposed by Congress and the White House

- This includes support from **77%** of young people living in rural areas
Learnings: Top reasons to join the CCC

- The most convincing reason to join the CCC is the $15 an hour living wage with benefits.
- The second most convincing reason besides salary/benefits is receiving assistance to pay for school or pay off student loans.
- The least convincing reason was meeting and forming connections with young people from different backgrounds.

- Among those more interested in joining the CCC, the top three reasons to join are:
  - 1: earning $15/hour
  - 2: taking action to address climate change
  - 3: receiving assistance to pay for school or pay off student loans

- Among those that are less/not interested, the principal reasons are:
  - 1: they’re already happy with their job/career plan
  - 2: they don’t want to move if there isn’t availability close to home
Key Takeaways
• People want to take action on climate change & we need to message climate service years + the CCC as a way to do that
• Increasing the living allowance to $15/hr will make service years more appealing and accessible
• There is a lot of potential to increase interest in service years + support for the CCC
• We need to do a better job talking about the education award, particularly when marketing to students
• People need more information on where they can serve & the types of projects that are available, both near their hometowns & in communities across the country
• Personal benefits are most important and framing even altruistic benefits as personal gains could help to center the individual in our messaging
• Platforms that center video are important (YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat), especially for reaching younger audiences
Climate Message Testing
Historical Messaging Learnings

• “Better You, Greater Us” messaging that highlights personal gain & community/greater good benefits together consistently drives the best engagement.  
  – This is the basis of our definition of a service year as a paid opportunity to develop real-world skills through hands-on service.

• Messages relating to immediate concerns (e.g. addressing hurricanes and/or wildfires) typically drives more interest than generic messaging. Messaging that leverages current news headlines like hurricane/wildfire relief has generated more interest and clicks.

• In the past, we've had the most success in running ads that feature images of outdoor service, disaster response, and natural landscapes.
Initial Concepts & Message Testing

Based on learnings from the poll results and past recruitment efforts, we began testing four initial campaign concepts on social media:

1. What role will you play?
2. YOU
3. Want to help but don’t know how?
4. Our planet can’t wait
Concept #1: What role will you play?

- Highlight specific types of projects/role someone can play when serving

- Mix of urban & rural; conservation & climate

- “Cool” and tangible examples like:
  - building an urban farm in your neighborhood.
  - weatherizing homes to make them more energy efficient.
  - installing solar panels to reduce carbon emissions.
Concept #1: What role will you play?
Concept #2: YOU

- Centering YOU in the message to highlight what a climate service year allows an individual to do – both the benefits and the actual project

- Gets to the takeaway: personal benefits are most important and framing even altruistic benefits as personal gains could help to center the individual in our messaging (how “you” can take action)
Concept #2: YOU (Projects)

Example Ads

YOU can fight wildfires
YOU can preserve our national parks
YOU can bring solar to your neighborhood
YOU can respond to natural disasters
YOU can do a service year

Concept #2: YOU (Benefits)

Example Ads

Concept #3: Want to help but don’t know how?

• Acknowledge climate change is a big problem

• We all want to make a difference but it’s not clear how

• A service year is a way to help

• Put your passion into action
Concept #3: Want to help but don’t know how?

Example Ads

Want to help the environment, but don’t know how?

Want to help the environment, but don’t know how?

Want to help the environment, but don’t know how?

Want to help the environment, but don’t know how?
Concept #4: Our planet can’t wait

• Future generations need us to step up to save the environment
  – Poll responses showed a strong interest in protecting the environment for future generations

• Everyone has a role to play

• You can make a difference through a paid service year
Concept #4: Our planet can’t wait

Example Ads

Our planet can’t wait

Service Year
Sponsored by

Everyone has a role to play in saving the environment. From conserving parks and protecting wildlife to leading efforts to make your community more resilient, you can make a real difference. Be part of the solution through a paid service year at ServiceYear.org.
Early Campaign Results

• "You" campaign has been the top driver of applications from Facebook/Instagram and swipe ups on Snapchat

• "Our Planet Can't Wait" campaign has had some of the highest engagement — most comments on Facebook and most impressions on Snapchat

• "Want to help but don't know how?" has had the highest number of post saves on Facebook, suggesting that this concept could work well to build initial interest and create an audience for retargeting
Focus Group Learnings
Climate Focus Group

Background

Service Year Alliance worked with Strategies 360 to conduct a qualitative focus group to gather feedback on climate messaging, campaign concepts, example ads, and overall learnings on recruitment for service years.

The focus group ran from March 8 to March 10, 2022 and included 26 16-28 year olds, offering a range of perspectives from high school students, college grads, and individuals early in career exploration.
Climate Focus Group

Interest and buy-in for climate service years and the CCC

Most participants noted the benefits and positive value in service years generally—they liked the idea of being able to help people, socialize, meet different types of people/getting new perspectives, and feel involved with the community.

Both what stands out from the description of a service year and the most important benefits tend to be that a service year is paid, followed by the ability to gain new skills/experiences and the ability to make an impact/drive change.

Most participants see climate service years/the CCC as a good way to protect the environment, promote sustainability, and address environmental issues and prevent future issues.
Climate Focus Group

Participant concerns + areas to consider

The overall value of service years, as well as their role as part of the solution to climate change, needs to be clear:

• General concerns about safety, health, and pay — in addition to possibly moving to a new place and adjusting both to the location and new relationships. Some participants cited the potential for it to disrupt someone's career path and concerns about the time commitment.

• Participants had concerns about the lasting impact of climate service years and their value as being too small when compared to an issue like climate change that requires structural and systemic solutions.
Climate Focus Group

Feedback on ad campaigns

Messages
• Participants respond particularly well when statements clarify the benefits, e.g. pay and education awards. They want and need to know up front what they will get out of the experience. The most popular statement focuses on the pay and education benefits.
• They also respond well to the more descriptive statements with details on how their service will make an impact. For example, participants ask how exactly they would be helping the environment.

Photos
• Participants respond really well to images with people who look happy and engaged in their work and that show them what service could look like.
• The YOU images are popular, especially “YOU can get paid.”
• “Our planet can’t wait” with the image of the wildfire is also popular as it demonstrates the urgency and the need and helps people visualize the impact they could have. As a concept, this needs to be paired with the positive solution/way to take action.
Discussion
Discussion

**Messaging service years:**

1. What are the top reasons people join your program? How does this factor into your current messaging?

2. What resonates most with you from the message testing, ad concepts, and learnings?

3. Is there anything surprising, or that you feel is missing, based on the poll results and message testing?
Discussion

Big Ideas:

Successful recruitment doesn’t happen in isolation — what are some big ideas you have relating to partnerships, tactical strategies, and resources that could be beneficial not just for your program, but for national service more generally?
Closing and Resources
Takeaways from today’s session

Reflection

• At the start of the session, you reflected on what’s going well, challenges, and a goal you had for recruitment.

• Taking into consideration our conversations on recruitment today, what is at least one new thing you’d like to try with recruitment this year?
  – Examples could include new messages, partnerships, virtual platforms, tactics, etc.
Resources + Ways to Stay Engaged

• **Resources:**
  – ServiceYear.org
  – Service Year Resource Hub: resources.serviceyear.org
    • Recruitment Plan Guide + Digital Recruitment Toolkit

• **Stay engaged:**
  – Help test messages, use shared language, and share feedback
  – Share photos and stories
  – Send us questions, ideas, thoughts
Thank you!

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