

Agency: East Canadian Outward Bound School

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The Outward Bound Experience

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Outward Bound is an international not-for-profit school dedicated to helping people grow by confronting their self-imposed limitations. It runs a variety of programs for corporations, individuals, and people with special needs. These programs often involve trips deep into the wilderness, and the experience is intense and memorable.

In summer 1995, the Eastern Canadian Outward Bound School was in difficulty. Like many Outward Bound chapters around the world, enrollment was down, enquiries were down, and the school was carrying a large debt. The School needed to boost enrollment in the public courses that are the School's primary source of funds.

We undertook a thorough analysis, and the issue was clear. Outward Bound had lost its uniqueness. Where once it stood alone for 'personal growth trips', commercial tour operators had created adventure-travel programs that people felt were similar. Furthermore, these programs were lower cost (because of volume), so Outward Bound was losing the 'value' war. The situation was untenable.

The key insight was a 'differentiating opportunity' to set Outward Bound apart. Centred on this idea, we launched a mixed media campaign in September 95, selling openings in the upcoming Winter courses. We followed this in March 96, selling the Summer courses. This almost doubled enrollment for the Winter courses versus the year before. Enquiries for March–July 96 increased 95%, and enrollment for Summer 96 increased 12%, generating \$85,000 in incremental revenue. Enquiries for November 95–October 96 were up 45%, and enrollment increased 15% – the only increase at Outward Bound in North America.

SITUATION ANALYSIS

Enrollment at the Outward Bound Eastern Canadian School had been flat for years. Anecdotal evidence suggested that Canadians no longer found Outward Bound and its programs unique – and that cheaper adventure travel could be bought from regular tour operators. With the average Outward Bound course costing \$1400, people were turning elsewhere. This pattern was occurring around the world, and few Outward Bound schools were increasing enrollment in the 90s.

The need for growth was urgent. Outward Bound not only runs public courses; it also offers them for groups with special needs, like Abused Women, Cancer Survivors, the Differently-Abled, and Inner City Kids. These special-needs courses take up to a quarter of the Outward Bound budget; and without increased revenues, the school was in jeopardy of having to curtail them, or go more deeply into debt.

In 1994 and 1995 the marketing effort had not been especially disciplined. Outward Bound had relied on pro-bono media space for awareness and enquiries (leading potentially to enrollment). Some ad materials had been provided to magazines and newspapers, and the media had provided some limited free space. To revamp this for 1995/96, we set a disciplined planning approach in place.

Strategy

We had to build interest and awareness with limited means, and sharpen Outward Bound's point of difference.

Our core insight came from interviewing people before, during and after they went on Outward Bound. We even accompanied new participants on the course.¹ The response was unanimous – the Outward Bound experience was like no other, putting you through every emotion from fear to joy. You felt intense self-discovery and personal growth. This became our 'differentiating opportunity':

By focusing on what happens mentally, as opposed to physically, we would stand out from the crowd of competitive pretenders.²

When people were looking for packaged self-improvement we presented Outward Bound as an opportunity for lasting personal growth. In tone, we couldn't be too self-righteous because that would not be true to Outward Bound – which eschews dogma in favour of letting people find their own truths. We also had to reflect that Outward Bound is fun.

Execution

This was a totally integrated campaign, called 'Learn more about Yourself', with four key components:³

- Donated Media: There were three magazine ads and a brochure, for magazines willing to provide free space. Creative ran according to the availability of media.
- Direct Mail: The same creative was adapted for high potential prospects, including former attendees, former enquirers, and employees of companies that had bought Outward Bound courses before. This was targeted at enrollment for Winter 95/96 and Summer 96.
- Retail presence: We provided counter cards and posters through 1996 for like-minded retailers such as Mountain Equipment Co-op and Trailhead.
- Consumer Promotion: We adapted material for two opportunities: Upper Canada Breweries gave away three all-expense paid Outward Bound courses via case inserts in Summer 96. Kraft/General Foods gave away ten Outward Bound courses in an on-pack promotion in Fall 96.

RESULTS

Winter 95/96 enrollment almost doubled, with an insert in Toronto Life in September 95, and direct mail. Total enrollment for the 95/96 season finished up 15% versus the year before, at a time when no other North American Outward Bound School saw an increase.⁴

Enquiries substantially increased. As the graph in [Figure 1](#) shows, the combination of magazine advertising, direct mail, and retail presence doubled enquiries over March–June 96. Enquiries finished the year 45% higher than the previous year.

The increased enrollment generated \$85,000 in extra revenue for Outward Bound – almost enough to wipe out the school's debt – and helped secure the immediate future for the four special-needs courses.

ISOLATING ADVERTISING AS THE VARIABLE

The attached chart shows a general correlation between advertising activity and the response. We can also use the previous lack of growth in Canada (and the lack of growth elsewhere in North America) as 'controls'. Given that Canada in 95/96 was the only Outward Bound school with increased enrollment, it is reasonable to conclude that this was caused by the new integrated program.

CONCLUSION

It's dangerous for any brand to lose its point of difference – whether it is a multimillion dollar household name, or a not-for-profit organization. As with ABC CANADA, it's encouraging to see that the same principles for success apply regardless of size or category: a core insight, delivered by finely targeted creative.

As to the 'moccasins' Crossover Note, the Outward Bound team did a bit more than drop in on a focus group or

two – a good example of paying more than lip service to the idea of getting close to the target.

ENDNOTES

1. Breaking conventions. Walking a mile in the moccasins.
2. Digging for Insight
3. Integration. Multi-media and promotion with a limited budget.
4. Counterpunching. This was a program that reversed previous trends.

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NOTES & EXHIBITS

FIGURE 1: OUTWARD BOUND – WEEKLY INQUIRIES

