



Opportunities Online: Effectively Marketing Employability Skills to Young Adults

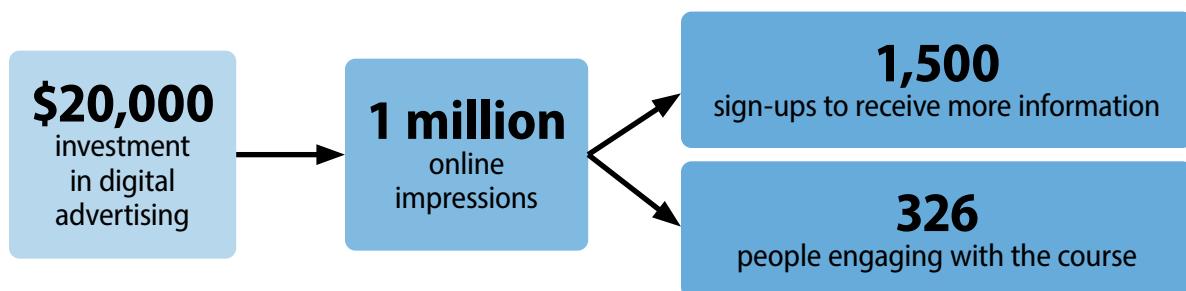
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CONTENTS

The Challenge: Reaching the Unreachable ... 2
The Response: Understanding the Needs of Opportunity Youth ... 2
The Winning Strategy: A Targeted Digital Approach ... 3
The Remarkable Results: Doubling the Goal ... 5
Key Takeaways for Marketing Employability Skills to Young Adults ... 5
Digital is Dominant ... 5
Intent Matters (Google's Edge) ... 6
Specificity is Success ... 6
Test, Learn, Optimize ... 6
Partnerships Accelerate Impact ... 6
About ncIMPACT Initiative ... 7
About Carolina Across 100 ... 7
About Our State, Our Work ... 7

How do you reach and engage with an audience that can be particularly hard to connect with? In North Carolina, an important initiative is underway to re-engage the state's approximately 140,000 Opportunity Youth (young adults ages 16-24) who are not currently in school or employed. The "7 Steps to Get Hired: The Key to Building Your Future" course seeks to directly address the need that some Opportunity Youth have for enhanced employability skills. Our team

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Figure 1. Our Four-Month Experiment

conducted a four-month experiment using different approaches and styles of advertising to promote the “7 Steps to Get Hired” course. The advertising resulted in one million online impressions, which led to an impressive number of requests for more information and over 300 people engaging with the course (see Figure 1). This recent success story from our partnerships offers powerful insight into what truly works to “engage.”

The Challenge: Reaching the Unreachable

The challenge wasn’t just creating a valuable course but effectively marketing it to its intended audience—young adults navigating complex life circumstances who may not be connected to usual networks for information or guidance. Opportunity Youth are often a difficult population for community, education, workforce, and other development groups to reach. During the [Our State, Our Work](#) program, community leaders from nonprofit, education, business, workforce, and other sectors voiced their shared challenge of reaching and authentically engaging Opportunity Youth online to connect them with services. Additionally, in [state-wide focus groups](#), employers shared that when they hired these younger employees, workplace skills such as basic communication and time management often needed to be developed.

The Response: Understanding the Needs of Opportunity Youth

[Carolina Across 100](#) responded by bringing a team of experts together to design the “7 Steps to Get Hired” course. The course is a free, interactive, and self-paced resource covering essential skills for future success, from resume building to on-the-job communication.

The design team included the Our State, Our Work teams, faculty and administrators with the [North Carolina Community College System](#), Carolina Across 100 leaders, other workforce leaders from across the state, and young adults. The team sought to be responsive to needs of Opportunity Youth that they identified in focus groups.

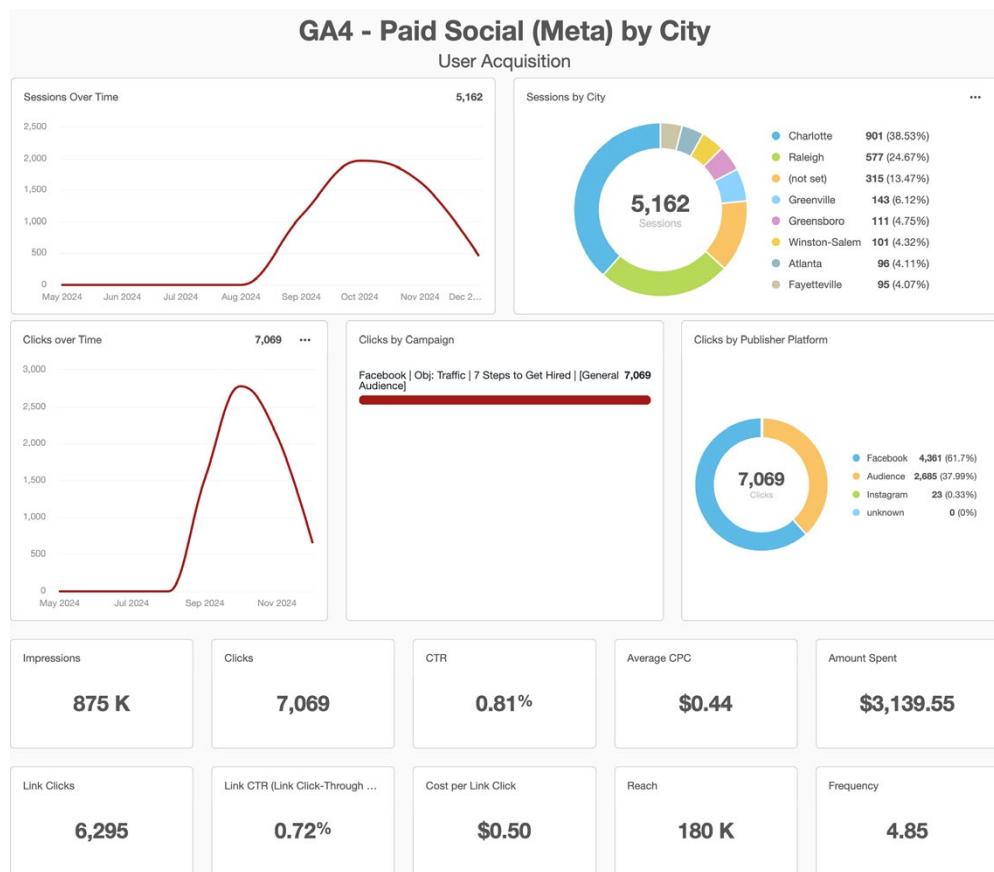
To connect the target audience to the course, the team needed to drive immediate sign-ups while also gathering data to inform future outreach. Those tasks required creative approaches.

The Winning Strategy: A Targeted Digital Approach

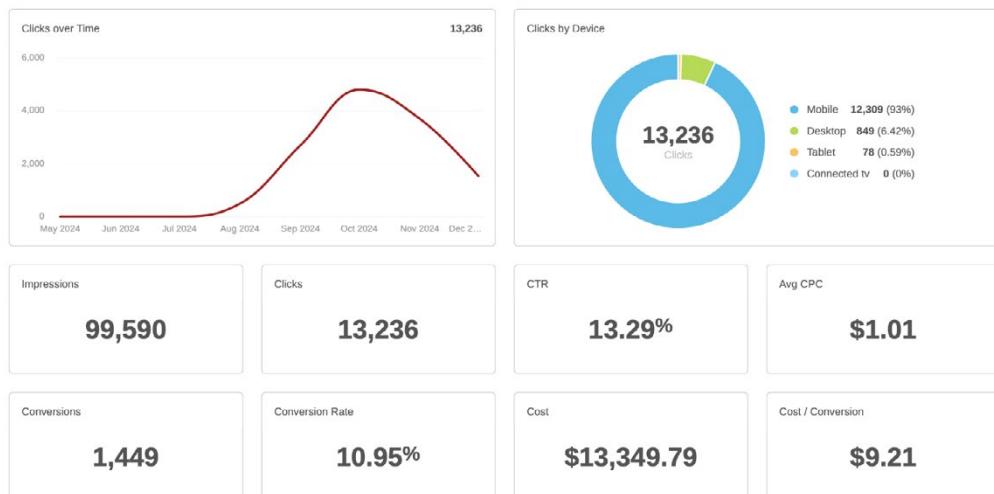
A thoughtful, data-driven approach to engaging with Opportunity Youth was paramount to its success. Carolina Across 100's strategy with [Hive Digital](#)¹, a digital marketing company specializing in search optimization and website analytics, hinged on a few key pillars.

- **Hyper-targeted audience segmentation.** The case study team used detailed demographic and psychographic data to speak to Opportunity Youth. For example, young adults searching for topics such as night classes, childcare, and terms that could identify them as Opportunity Youth received targeted ads directing them to information about the course. These young adults were then directed to a sign-up page to enroll in the course.
- **Tailored messaging.** Messages were tailored to resonate with the specific interests of Opportunity Youth, ensuring the ads felt relevant and spoke directly to their needs and aspirations. Key messaging included emphasizing the self-paced nature of the course, its no-cost participation for users, and that users could learn important skills that North Carolina employers are specifically looking for in future employees.
- **Cross-platform powerhouse (Google & Meta).** The team simultaneously utilized both Google Ads and Meta (Facebook/Instagram) advertising. This multi-channel approach helped them reach young adults where they were most engaged online. The results were telling.
 - **Meta (Facebook/Instagram) delivered massive reach.** Meta advertising resulted in over 874,000 impressions (the number of times content is seen by the audiences) and reached 180,000 users across nearly 453 cities. However, only thirty-one people followed the ads' prompts and submitted forms as a result of that engagement. While the number of users who entered personal information on the Carolina Across 100 site were lower, the broad reach established significant awareness of the course (see Figure 2).
 - **Google Ads drove high conversions.** The Google campaign, spanning almost 500 cities, delivered nearly 100,000 impressions with an impressive 13.29 percent interaction rate, leading to over 13,000 clicks and 1,449 direct form submissions at a 10.95 percent conversion rate. This data highlights the power of intent-based advertising (people searching for solutions) on Google (see Figure 3).
- **Continuous creative optimization.** Hive Digital worked with the team to develop multiple variations of ads, constantly testing different messaging, visuals, and calls-to-action. This iterative process allowed them to identify what truly resonated with the audience and maximize engagement and conversions.
- **Robust performance tracking and analysis.** The team's focus was to understand the data and create relevant ads to place on specific platforms. Implementing consistent tracking and analytic reporting provided ongoing insights into user engagement metrics such as click-through rates and cost-per-conversion. This data was used to make real-time adjustments as necessary and inform future outreach strategies.

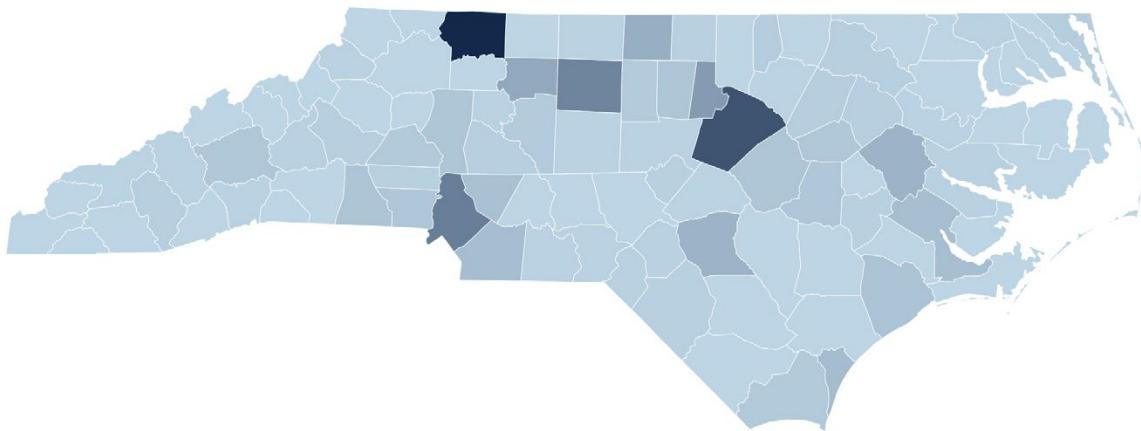
1. “[Carolina Across 100 Case Study](#),” Hive Digital, <https://www.hivedigital.com/case-studies/carolina-across-100-case-study/>.

Figure 2. Meta (Facebook/Instagram) Campaign

Source: "[Carolina Across 100 Case Study](https://www.hivedigital.com/case-studies/carolina-across-100-case-study/)" (Hive Digital Inc., accessed December 4, 2025), <https://www.hivedigital.com/case-studies/carolina-across-100-case-study/>.

Figure 3. Google Ads Campaign

Source: "[Carolina Across 100 Case Study](https://www.hivedigital.com/case-studies/carolina-across-100-case-study/)" (Hive Digital Inc., accessed December 4, 2025), <https://www.hivedigital.com/case-studies/carolina-across-100-case-study/>.

Figure 4. Clicks by County

Source: "[Hive Results by County](#)" (Flourish, accessed December 4, 2025), <https://public.flourish.studio/visualisation/21581210/>.

The Remarkable Results: Doubling the Goal

Within just two months of the four-month campaign, the conversion goal of 700 sign-ups doubled, achieving this with only 50 percent of the allocated budget. The campaign also successfully reached young adults in every single county across North Carolina as recorded in [Clicks by County](#). As shown in the figure, Surry County had the most engagement out of all counties at over 7,200 clicks, but every county showed at least one click. This demonstrates both the efficiency and widespread impact of the campaign (see Figure 4).

Key Takeaways for Marketing Employability Skills to Young Adults

Digital is Dominant

Young adults are online, and digital advertising platforms like Google and Meta are non-negotiable for reaching and engaging this population. The Hive Digital team noted ad views on social media often led to an external search for more information using a search engine rather than continuing the search through the ad. This behavior may be due to skepticism about the legitimacy of ads and may have been a significant contributor for the higher Google conversion rates.

While Meta initiatives did not lead to as many direct conversions, the channel offered an inexpensive means of engaging targeted users enough to encourage them to explore the course. Future teams may choose to use Meta more strategically to attract visitors because it is a cost-effective way to reach people connected to the target audience as well as Google Ads and/or other platforms with messaging that is catered to the target audience.

Table 1. Google Ad Campaign Data

Campaign	Impressions	Clicks	CTR	Avg CPC	Conversions	Conversion Rate	Cost
PMax Obj, Leads 7 Steps to Get Hired Program	38,042	6,999	18.40%	\$0.37	1,260.00	18.00%	\$2,611.23
Search Nonbranded Job Skills	11,129	1,108	9.96%	\$2.46	6.00	0.54%	\$2,720.77
Search Nonbranded Programs	25,570	2,137	8.36%	\$1.24	68.00	3.18%	\$2,654.65
Search Nonbranded Soft Skills	17,047	2,194	12.87%	\$1.20	46.00	2.10%	\$2,637.92
Search Nonbranded Work Readiness Certificate	7,802	798	10.23%	\$3.42	69.00	8.65%	\$2,725.22

Source: "[Carolina Across 100 Case Study](https://www.hivedigital.com/case-studies/carolina-across-100-case-study/)" (Hive Digital Inc., accessed December 4, 2025), <https://www.hivedigital.com/case-studies/carolina-across-100-case-study/>.

Intent Matters (Google's Edge)

While social media helps increase awareness, Google Ads accurately capture information including whether individuals are actively seeking solutions related to job skills, career growth, or employment as seen in Table 1. Each ad campaign allowed the team to see what words resonated, whether the campaign led to engagement, and whether the person then accessed the sign-up form (e.g., conversion). The team could also compare the conversion rates to the cost of each campaign. They were able to see that, over time, the ads for "7 Steps to Get Hired" garnered greater conversions, perhaps reflecting growing name recognition for the course. The final data showed that approximately \$13,500 in ads garnered 1,449 form submissions.

Specificity is Success

Audience segmentation and tailored content specific to user needs and pain points are critical. In both Google and Meta initiatives, users identifying as female engaged with ads at a higher rate and volume—especially when coupled with similar gender images or video ads.

Test, Learn, Optimize

Continuous testing of creatives and messages, coupled with robust data analysis, allows for agile optimization of messaging and focused ad campaigns that maximizes the return on investment. For example, very few users accessed the early content on desktops. Thus, the team focused on content optimized for mobile viewing. In addition, keyword and search term data indicated key terms by click volume and highlighted employment programs offering in-demand skills training, resume building assistance, and receipt of certificates to validate achievements.

Partnerships Accelerate Impact

The collaboration between the Carolina Across 100 program and Hive Digital demonstrates how specialized expertise in digital marketing can significantly amplify the reach and effectiveness of vital community programs. The success of the "7 Steps to Get Hired" course marketing campaign proves that with the right digital strategy, it's possible to reach Opportunity Youth

and successfully connect them with the resources they need to build a brighter future. It's a testament to the power of targeted, data-driven digital marketing in making a real-world difference.

A Caveat

Our digital campaign was not the only reason for our success. The design team and other partners undoubtedly also shared information about the course with young adults or those connected to them. It is impossible to disentangle those effects from the digital ads as they organically occurred.

About ncIMPACT Initiative

Launched in 2017 by the [UNC School of Government](#), the [ncIMPACT Initiative \(ncIMPACT\)](#) is a statewide endeavor that strives to support local communities across North Carolina. By leveraging data-driven insights and evidence-based strategies, we aim to equip civic leaders and stakeholders with the tools necessary to make informed decisions and drive innovations that enhance the well-being of their constituents. In partnership with civic leaders and diverse stakeholders, ncIMPACT will help improve tens of thousands of lives in all 100 of the state's counties.

About Carolina Across 100

[Carolina Across 100](#) is a five-year, pan-university effort to partner with communities in each of North Carolina's 100 counties. The project is charged and supported by the Chancellor's office at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC), coordinated by the UNC School of Government's ncIMPACT Initiative, and led by the Carolina Engagement Council. It embodies this public university's mission to enhance the quality of life for all people in the state by building and supporting cross-sector collaborations that address challenges created or exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

About Our State, Our Work

The Carolina Across 100 team carried out a [deep listening phase](#) that resulted in [Our State, Our Work](#) as the inaugural program. More than sixty trained UNC undergraduate and graduate students conducted in-depth, virtual interviews with stakeholders across the state. After identifying and recruiting interview participants via a survey of over 3,000 people throughout all 100 counties, the team sent targeted email invitations to individuals representing geographic and sector diversity.