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Client: Year Up

Project: Referrer Messaging

Introduction: The following document reflects Hiker’s developing vision for key messaging to referrers. Referrers are critical to the health of Year Up’s top-of-the-funnel student recruitment efforts, providing a national source of sustainable and scalable student leads. The purpose of this messaging is to help Year Up foster deeper relationships with potential referrers. Messaging should provide referrers with the strong intellectual and emotional arguments for why they should refer the young people in their lives to Year Up.

In preparation for creating the new proposed messaging, Hiker has conducted several hours of interviews with Year Up stakeholders, including four interviews with current “super referrers” and Year Up recruitment. We watched hours of existing video content and explored both Year Up marketing materials and competitor language.

TABLE OF CONTENTS FOR THIS DOCUMENT

- I. TWO-PAGE OVERVIEW OF REFERRER MESSAGING POSITION
- II. POSITION SUMMARY
- III. TWO-PAGE AUDIENCE ASSESSMENT
 - 1. WHO REFERS?
 - 2. THE CONTEXT
- IV. PROPOSED KEY MESSAGES (4)

REFERRER MESSAGING

Referrers are among the most ardent supporters of the Year Up mission and express that support through their direct personal connections with prospective students. Because they are already in one-on-one relationships with the young people Year Up hopes to enroll, referrers are often able to deliver better, more qualified leads for our program. Referrers care deeply about the mission, but care even more about the welfare of the *specific* young people they refer. In other words, Supporters support our cause. Referrers support *individuals*.

For referrers, the mission is deeply connected to their life. It's about family and community. It's about a grandson, a cousin, a close neighbor, or a student from their school. It's about people they know and interact with every day. And it's about their own roots in the community. In short, it's personal. To be successful, Year Up key messaging to referrers must recognize and value that truth. We don't ever want our messaging to be perceived as that of outsiders who think they are coming in to "fix" or "save" people, schools, or communities.

Referrers are protective of the young people in their lives. So naturally, they won't refer a young person to Year Up unless they trust us completely. **An emphasis on trust, transparency, follow through, and mutual benefits are especially important for successful referrer messaging.** As one Year Up super referrer put it. *"I care about the organization. And I care about young people. But trust is critical. Without trust, it just won't work."* Year Up builds trust by showcasing our success stories, promoting our great outcomes, emphasizing shared values and desires, speaking honestly about our goals, and always doing what we promise. It must be absolutely clear at every point in our messaging to referrers that our primary stakeholders are, and always will be, the students.

Year Up must expect and even embrace doubt from potential referrers and students. Because our mission is just, our program effective, and our results outstanding — healthy skepticism is an asset for long-term relationship building. We aren't salespeople pushing a product or service. We are community collaborators. We are family-friendly and community-centric. To referrers, seeing is believing, so transparency must be our default setting. We should never be defensive or try to "hard sell" referrers, potential students, or anyone else on our mission. Rather, we state our goals plainly, point to our outcomes, and highlight where our values and interests align.

Though the keystone of the Year Up program is the 6-month internship at a local partner corporation, it's important that referrers also recognize Year Up as a primary pathway to college or secondary education. For friends and family referrers and many CBOs, a college education still represents the ultimate benchmark for measuring a path to success. What's more, for some influencers (teachers and guidance counselors, etc.), our mission may appear to conflict with state or local mandates to raise direct college attendance. Referrer messaging must promote the active role Year Up plays in moving more students into the college process. At the same time, we want to

celebrate how a non-traditional path to higher education is not only likely, it may well be preferred, given that a solid job at a major company can lead to the kind of stability that makes the pursuit of college education possible. As Year Up's founder has said, "You have to feed your belly before you can feed your mind." Our goal as an organization is to assist young people in doing both well.

To cultivate referrers, Year Up must tell our story in the context of local community stakeholders, focusing on their audiences, desires, and goals as well as our own. This requires empathy, humility, and an attitude of service and true collaboration. Messaging should position Year Up as an organization that actually helps referrers achieve *their* goals – faster and more effectively. We want potential partners to know that though we engage our mission with great expertise and use a model that is proven to work, Year Up never assumes we have all the answers. We engage in honest and equal partnership, and we are eager for local partners to lead where their expertise is deepest. Our approach must be to focus on shared values (economic self-sufficiency, pathway to college education, access to corporate careers, industry-specific training, etc.) and work together to find the best ways to get the results we all want.

Year Up offers local partners greater capacity to pursue and achieve their goals. Coming together as like-minded partners allows for everybody to share in the success. It's critical that all our referrers recognize the direct-to-mission benefit of working with Year Up. Their referral helps us, but it helps them, too. We need to show teachers and guidance counselors how Year Up can help them obtain higher college enrollment numbers for their students. We need to show Alumni that when they share their Year Up experience with a friend and make a referral, we'll make sure that opportunity is not wasted. And we need to show parents, grandparents, and others how — in just one year — we connect motivated young adults just like their loved ones to real opportunity for success in the professional world or in continuing their education.

Before referring a young adult to Year Up, community-based organizations, local nonprofit partners, teachers, guidance counselors, coaches, chambers of commerce, and yes, even grandparents all require one thing — to see proof that it works. So along with proof of concept, messaging should be transparent in how our program operates, how we grow, hire talent, and collaborate with local partners. Whether it's a campus group in place to support DACA recipients and first-generation college students or a local nonprofit battling homelessness among young adults — what Year Up recruiters hear first in pitching to potential referrers is often a variation of "*We don't know you.*" This is not a criticism. Referrers take a wait and see approach, so along with our ambitions to grow, we must exercise patience. When people see our mission and how it directly connects to our great (and sustainable) results — they get excited and want to be a part of it. To paraphrase one Year Up recruiter, we must stay focused on the work we do, celebrate student success stories, and let the mission shine through.

SUMMARY

To strengthen messaging to referrers:

- Be mindful that supporters support our cause; referrers support *individuals*.
 - A. For referrers — it's personal
 - B. Referrers have direct, one-on-one connections and we can't put those at risk
 - C. Mission is deeply connected to referrers' lives
 - D. It's about family and community
 - E. Acknowledge referrer feelings — Affirm connections, values, and concerns
 - F. We don't "fix" or "save" people, schools, or communities
- Building trust in Year Up is paramount — referrers won't refer unless they trust us
 - A. Referrers are protective of their young people and communities
 - B. We must emphasize transparency of program and intent
 - C. Always follow through on our promises — Do what you say
 - D. Point to mutual benefits of working with Year Up
 - E. To bolster trust – showcase stories, promote good outcomes, emphasize shared values, speak honestly about goals, and always do what we promise
- Make it clear that the primary stakeholder is always the student
 - A. Embrace referrer skepticism and doubt – it shows they care
 - B. We don't "hard sell" our mission. Trust the model and good outcomes.
 - C. We're collaborative. Family-friendly. Community-centric
 - D. Highlight outcomes and align interests
- Showcase Year Up as primary (and proven) path to college AND employment
 - A. For Friends and Family referrers, college education is seen as benchmark for success
 - B. We facilitate a non-traditional path to higher education, undergirded job stability
 - C. Raising college enrollment rates is the main goal for many Influencers and CBOs, but a reliable job may be the best, most-productive first stepping stone
 - D. We provide learning and study tools that set young people up for success in college
- Position Year Up to local nonprofits as an extension of their mission and goals
 - A. Year Up is an expert, ego-free collaborative partner
 - B. We understand our partners, their audiences, and their goals
 - C. We show empathy, humility, and attitude of service to referrers
 - D. We are *Doers* — We get results. We have a proven model
- Referrers care about *individuals*, but they also care deeply about our mission and how it serves to strengthen their communities. So, use facts and numbers to promote positive outcomes, but make sure we always allow room for the mission to shine through.

AUDIENCE ASSESSMENT — WHO REFERS?

Referrers are Year Up's most reliable, direct, and lasting source to potential new students. As such, they are invaluable to our mission. They are our bridge builders. Connectors. Facilitators. Motivators. Referrers are the catalysts who spark our most successful introductions to potential applicants, and they are important allies as we seek to grow nationally into new markets. As a group, referrers fall into one of four main categories:

Influencers — High school teachers, guidance counselors, coaches, those in high school and GED program roles, and other consistent authority/support figures whose work puts them in positions of influence with members of our target audience. About one third of referrals come from the influencer group, though to facilitate faster growth into new markets, Year Up will need to increase this percentage. For influencers, messaging will set the foundation for relationship building with Year Up and present our program as a viable solution for the many young people for whom moving right into college may not be the right first step for them. Messaging to influencers should show how Year Up can support their school or local program objectives to advance college placement —though through a non-traditional path — and support that messaging with relevant information on aligned interests and clear data on the positive long-term outcomes of our grads.

Friends and Family — Our largest group of referrers (61% in a recent survey), these “helpers” are older and may include parents of New Americans or recent high school graduates, grandparents providing active support to a young person, close neighbors, or a friend from the community. Friends and family offer the most direct line to potential students. Their referral is almost always driven by emotion and a desire to help. Messaging needs to affirm the sentiments behind that emotion and further support with facts about positive outcomes (particularly as a pathway to college education). Language or cultural barriers might hinder messaging to this audience, as well as skepticism of outside programs where Year Up brand is less known. Key messaging can set the tone in addressing these challenges by showcasing our commitment to diversity, transparency of operation, trustworthiness, collaboration with community partners, and great graduate results.

Community Builders — Community-based organizations and local partners who share mutual interest in the success of the young people we serve. These could include the local Chamber of Commerce, corporate partners who are active in the community, area nonprofits, national NFPs with a local presence, or local religious or civic groups. While all referrer groups are vital to our success, our Influencers and Community Builders (what we might call institutional or super referrers) offer the greatest opportunity as a source for long-term, scalable hot leads to motivated young people. Messaging for this group must highlight our ability to get the results at scale, our trustworthiness, our shared values, and position Year Up as a flexible, truly collaborative partner who enhances (rather than replicates) existing efforts.

Alumni/Current Students — Year Up alumni and student referrers represent one of the best ways to get strong leads to potential new students. After all, young people are highly motivated by peer-to-peer influence. Though this referrer group will not impact our ability to scale, the leads alumni/student referrers help generate tend to be hotter than those of others. This group enjoys sharing and “spreading the love,” and messaging should capitalize on this sharer’s culture. Messaging to alumni and current student referrers needs to be consistent with themes promoted during their Learning & Development and internship. Referrer messaging should reinforce Year Up’s values and position referring as a way to “support the next person on their journey up” as well as a way to give back to the community.

AUDIENCE ASSESSEMENT — THE CONTEXT

It bears repeating that for referrers, the Year Up mission is personal. It's about specific individuals — a grandchild, friend, or student they know well. It is this connection that defines the referrer audience and drives their desire to take action. Referrers might be teachers, guidance counselors, or others working in the local school system. A referrer might be the director of a community-based nonprofit, a member of the chamber of commerce, a religious leader, or the head of civic organization. Referrers could be a friends, family, or neighbors or our own students and alumni. Each of these groups measures success for the young adult they refer somewhat differently. Some seek a proven pathway to college. Others are motivated by the industry-specific skills training and corporate internship. Still others see a way to realize their job or mission goals faster, or perhaps they simply want to give a young adult they care about some useful career direction and professional training that will serve that young person well in whatever they do next in life.

Potential referrers may be:

- Family member, friend, or neighbor concerned about the welfare of a young person
Thinking/feeling: *I want my grandchild to have more than I did. They're smart. I'd hate to see them forced to settle for less. If they had a little support, I know they can do anything.*
- A program manager of a local nonprofit trying to find ways to help even more young people
Thinking/feeling: *I've been in workforce development my whole career. This is my community, and it's important to me that I get this right. I love the work we're doing. But is there a way to provide even more to the people we serve? Maybe we should partner with others in the area. Find allies. Combine our efforts. Who knows, maybe support even more people. Is that possible?*
- A guidance counselor in a school system with a state mandate to raise college enrollment
Thinking/feeling: *I've got some good students. They just need more guidance. Some support. It's my job to push all these young people right into college? I'm not sure that's even the right first step for everybody! I wish there were a stepping stone before college. And what about my young moms? They have so much to manage already. Even with grants, how can we expect them to survive college? Funds being pulled. Resources cut. There must be a way for them, too.*
- A Year Up Alum who's busy in their own career but would help if they could
Thinking/feeling: *I want to refer my cousin. He's helping to support his family, and he deserves this opportunity, too. Year Up has had my back. I think they can help him make this work.*
- A director of a local nonprofit working with young people often marginalized by society
Thinking/feeling: *My clients need jobs! An education. Who's going to give them that? We support them well. But we don't have enough time or resources to do everything we want. These young people have a lot of reasons to doubt adults making big promises. They have a lot of good practical knowledge. I want to get the jobs and college education opportunities they deserve!*

PROPOSED KEY MESSAGES

Key Message 1 — CONNECT A YOUNG ADULT IN YOUR LIFE TO REAL OPPORTUNITY

When you connect a young adult with Year Up, you can take pride seeing them develop the professional skills needed to reach their full potential.

Key theme expanded:

The young people who enroll at Year Up go from minimum wage and an uncertain future to a 6-month internship, professional skills training, and a pathway to career and college success in just one year. Skeptical? If it were our grandchild, neighbor, student, or loved one — we'd be skeptical, too. At Year Up, we appreciate doubt, because doubt means we are partnering with someone who actually cares about the future of the young adults we are committed to serving. We always encourage tough questions and hard conversations, because we know that every young person who enrolls in our program is worth taking the time to make sure we serve them in the right way. Year Up is a nonprofit whose mission is to close the Opportunity Divide. To date, 19,500 young adults from underserved communities across America have enrolled in our program. Within four months of graduation, 90% our grads either have a job in the career track we trained them in or are enrolled in postsecondary education or training — and many are doing both! In short, our program works. If you know a motivated young person who's ready for something more — Year Up wants to hear from you. Be the one to connect a young adult you care about to real, transformative opportunity.

Key Message 2 — OPEN A PATH TO COLLEGE FOR A YOUNG PERSON YOU KNOW

Because our training coursework is eligible for college credit, Year Up is a proven, often more affordable, way for young adults to jumpstart their college education.

Key theme expanded:

Year Up offers an alternate route into the college process. But not an inferior one. Many top business leaders from Wall Street to local chambers of commerce now believe a direct move into college may not be the right fit for every high school student. Guidance counselors and college admissions professionals agree. For a young adult facing obstacles that make college enrollment difficult if not impossible — cost, family obligations, financial pressures, transportation difficulties, lack of an effective support system, and others — Year Up might be the perfect solution. We offer our students with unparalleled support providing as many tools and resources as possible for each student to build their own career and/or educational success. In other words, *we make sure the program works for them*. What's more, depending on the classes they take and the in-demand skills they train for, our students leave their "Year Up" with up to 31 college credits. Even students who went straight into college from high school wouldn't have many more credits than that after one year, and quite probably fewer! Also, unlike other students, Year Up students gain extremely valuable hands-on experience in a 6-month internship at one of our corporate partners. They earn an educational stipend to offset basic expenses throughout the year. They make important professional connections that can benefit them for years to come. And they learn the business skills and study habits that will serve them well whatever career or education path they choose. Year Up is a national nonprofit committed to closing the Opportunity Divide in America and making sure a path to a college education and career success is a realistic possibility for every young adult.

Key Message 3 — ALIGN INTERESTS, AND GET MORE DONE FOR YOUR COMMUNITY

By partnering with Year Up, community nonprofits and local schools save resources, strengthen mutual interests, and achieve common goals faster.

Key theme expanded:

Whether you're a teacher, guidance counselor, director of a community-based organization, coach, religious leader, or member of the chamber of commerce — *Year Up shares your interest in the success of the young people in our community.* Year Up is a national nonprofit whose mission is to close the Opportunity Divide. Our intensive, one-year education and internship program empowers motivated young adults to reach their potential through professional careers and higher education. In fact, four months after graduation, 90% of Year Up graduates are either employed — usually within the precise career track for which they trained — or are enrolled in postsecondary education or training. On average, these graduates enjoy a starting salary of \$38,000 a year — nearly two and half times the national minimum wage! There's no doubt our program works. But we can't do it alone. It takes the hard work, grit, and determination of our students. And it takes the help of local partners like you. The Opportunity Divide and the obstacles holding back so many young people today are complex — far too big for any one solution or organization to solve... Like-minded organizations must work together. We need each other. Not just because we have common goals, but because those common goals and values are part of what makes a “community” in the first place. When you refer a young adult to Year Up, you support our cause and set in motion a transformative opportunity for a young person, their family, and our community. In return, Year Up provides local nonprofits, schools, and our other community-based partners with greater capacity to achieve *their* goals — faster and more efficiently. With Year Up, you gain an ego-free, collaborative partner who will look out for your interests as much as our own. Let's team up, work together, and do even more for our community.

Key Message 4 — WATCH THE CONFIDENCE OF THE YOUNG PEOPLE YOU REFER SOAR

Our high-support system fosters self-confidence within the young people you refer and is an important way Year Up shows students how much we truly care about their success.

Key theme expanded:

We don't expect our students or the people who refer them to our program to give us their trust. Trust is something you earn. Our students learn how much we care about their success when they see our unparalleled support in action. While Year Up provides young people with big dreams and a powerful platform from which to launch their own career and educational journey, it is our high-support system that our graduates point to most often as responsible for their own success. Knowing you have a great support system around you, gives big dreamers the freedom to take risks. It gives them with the confidence to try new things, to push themselves, and grow. Because if they fail, they know that somebody's there to help them get back up again. That's family. That's friendship. That's community. And that's exactly what our program offers to the students referred to our program. For our students, support comes not only in the amazing breadth of services we offer, it reveals itself in the text from the friend concerned when you don't make it to a class. Or a late-night study session over the phone. Support is the hand shake and the smile and the respect they receive from fellow students and corporate peers alike. It's the belief of everyone in the Year Up program — from other students to our coaches and staff to class instructors and internship managers — that says, "You got this."