

Digital Outreach Playbook

Reaching marginalized populations
where they are — online

CODE *for*
AMERICA

WITH THE SUPPORT OF
THE JAMES IRVINE FOUNDATION

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Preface

Why we made this playbook

Government can work for the people, by the people, in the digital age. This is the founding vision of Code for America — a vision of every government service being simple, reliable, and easy to use, that people are served with dignity and that outcomes are measurably better.

At Code for America, we help make government services work, starting with people who need them most. The clients we serve are often among the most marginalized in our society and are at risk of persistent poverty and incarceration. Building a great digital service alongside our government partners is only one part of what is needed to serve people. We also have to employ strategies to effectively reach people where they are to facilitate greater access to these services.

Government's scale uniquely positions it to make a positive impact on low income Americans' everyday lives in a way few institutions can. Tools of the digital age, including online advertising, can help leverage that scale quickly and effectively. This playbook aims to share the lessons we've learned working with marginalized populations, so that ultimately they have greater awareness of and access to the services they need.

Who this playbook is for

This playbook is for nonprofits, community-based organizations, and governments who serve people who are eligible for government safety-net and criminal justice services, people with low incomes, and people in contact with the justice system.

In our conversations with many partners in these spaces, we've observed that most people who work on programs that serve marginalized populations approach outreach and marketing efforts to them with the assumption that they can't be reached effectively online. But that's no longer true. And those who do recognize that online outreach may be effective also believe that analog tactics — flyers, billboards, events — are more effective than digital outreach for their marketing budget. In this playbook we hope to bust that myth, with concrete examples from our ongoing projects and programs. We will also emphasize that an understanding of the kinds of technology that marginalized people use is a critical success factor in effective outreach and conversion to digital service obtainment. **Much like the adoption of cultural competency strategies (an understanding of how culture affects the clients we seek to engage) that are now widespread across government and nonprofit service delivery, technology competency (an understanding of the technology practices and use of the clients we seek to engage) is crucial for these same organizations.**

Principles and Best Practices for Digital Outreach to Marginalized Populations

When we refer to “marginalized populations” in this playbook, we are specifically referencing people eligible for safety net and criminal justice services. The two case studies profiled in this playbook each focus on digital outreach for a service that government delivers to a specific eligible population. When we reviewed and documented what we’ve learned from them so far, we identified some common takeaways.

Understand your audience and meet them where they are.

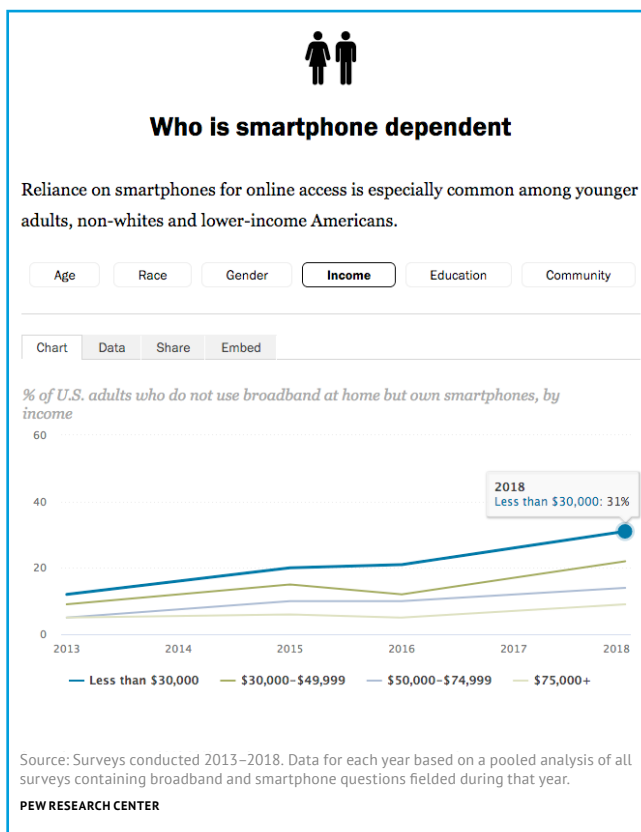
To start thinking about digital outreach that might work for a given population, start by talking with the people who effectively reach them, online or otherwise. These tend to be partners with direct service experience and an informed perspective about what messages resonate or don’t with people. Whenever you can, work with population-specific experts and with the organizations and individuals who best understand the problem: the people experiencing them. A clear understanding of the problem you’re trying to solve (e.g., get more people who are eligible for benefits but aren’t applying to apply) and the needs and preferences of the people you seek to serve are the foundation of any effective outreach strategy.

Digital tactics are necessary to reach people in low-incomes brackets.

When we think of ways to reach people with low incomes or unstable housing, many people think that digital marketing isn’t effective for this audience. But it can actually be more effective in terms of both number of people reached and cost per person reached than in-person and analog marketing tactics. There’s an opportunity to reach more people at a lower cost online than in person, including people with low incomes or unstable housing.

By all available evidence, though low-income Americans still lag behind those in higher income brackets when it comes to internet usage, they’re not far behind. An estimated 81% of Americans who earn \$30,000 or less per year use the internet, compared to 98% of Americans who earn \$75,000 or more.

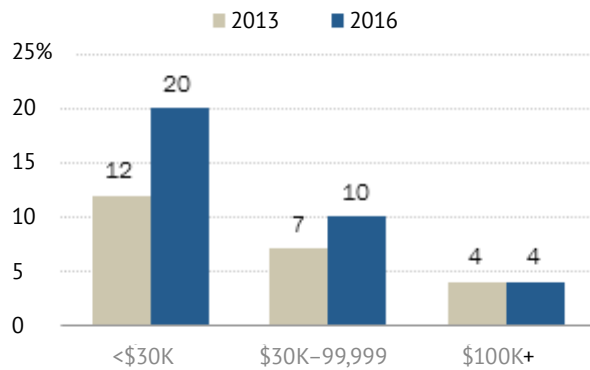
A 2015 Pew study found that the internet access of 13% of U.S. adults with an annual household income of less than \$30,000 is “smartphone-dependent,” compared with 1% of those whose total family household income is \$75,000 or more.



We’ve seen this firsthand with our ongoing ClientComm project. ClientComm enables case managers of people in community supervision programs (e.g. probation and parole) to send clients text messages from their computers or mobile devices. Today, people on community

Growing share of low-income Americans are smartphone-only internet users

% of U.S. adults who have a smartphone but no broadband at home, by annual household income



Source: Survey conducted Sept. 29–Nov. 6, 2016. Trend data from previous Pew Research Center surveys.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

“As is true of the population more broadly, smartphones play an especially prominent role in providing online access to blacks and Hispanics with relatively low household incomes. Only around half of blacks and Hispanics from households earning less than \$30,000 per year have traditional broadband service at home. But 63% of blacks and 69% of Hispanics in this income bracket are smartphone owners.

“Smartphones are not the only way those without traditional access options attempt to bridge these gaps. For blacks in particular, libraries can play an important role: 42% of black library users say they use libraries’ computers and internet connections, compared with one-quarter of whites and 24% of Hispanics, according to Center data. And blacks and Hispanics alike express pronounced interest in getting training that would help improve their digital skills. Some 46% of blacks and 48% of Hispanics say training to help them be more confident in using computers, smartphones, and the internet would help “a lot” in terms of making important decisions, compared with 20% of whites.”

supervision are more likely to have a cell phone than a landline, and more likely to read a text than a letter in the mail. We know this from talking to clients and gathering data from our pilot locations, where case managers see responses to most text messages within five minutes.

Compare this with a more traditional method of outreach: mailed court reminders. Not only do state criminal justice systems spend a lot of money on them, they also aren’t effectively reaching people. For mailed communications to work, a client needs to be living continuously at an address where they can check mail, which isn’t the case for many people on community supervision. For one of our local government partners, a high percentage of their clients on community supervision regularly experience unstable housing or homelessness. Their clients must have a cell phone to access basic services and get what they need. Often, all they have is a phone, so that’s the only way to successfully communicate with them.

Case managers have also told us that clients who have a WiFi-enabled phone know every free WiFi spot in their area. They tend to be skilled at planning ahead. They know, for instance, that when they get off the bus, there will be a Starbucks at the bus stop with WiFi so they can check in with a case manager. By enabling government to reach clients where they are — on their phones — they can now plan ahead with their case managers, which is something they couldn’t do before. This leads to more successful outcomes.

Never underestimate the value of clear language.

Clear language that gives the end-user a concise understanding of the value to them and the action they should take can go a long way in making your outreach effective.

Caitlin Docker, Senior Program Manager at Code for America, recounts a lesson from the Disaster CalFresh response to the Northern California fires:

“While Disaster CalFresh is complex from a program perspective, the goal of outreach should be to give information that activates those eligible and in need to

request the benefit. Simplifying the program's complexity and the many details to clear, actionable information can make outreach more effective."

How do you know if your messaging will work? The only way is to test it with real people in your target audience. You can have the good fortune of deep institutional expertise, but you can't know for sure what will work until you test your messaging. For a great place to start on plain language, see plainlanguage.gov.

Do a quick search for marketing campaign failures and you'll see a pattern: messaging goes wrong when its creators weren't able or willing to see the goal from the audience's point of view, or speak in their language.

Evaluate all available channels before deciding where to spend budget.

There are a lot of digital outreach options, and there's no way to know which combination will work best for your goals until you try them. They include:

- **Targeting blogs:** Writing guest posts, engaging in comments, and getting content placed on blogs that your target audience reads.
- **Affiliate marketing on partner websites:** Allowing others targeting the same audience to earn a commission by recommending your brand/product/service on their website.
- **Search engine marketing (SEM):** Paid advertising that increases visibility of your website in search engines like Google and Bing
- **Search engine optimization (SEO):** A way to increase the quantity and quality of traffic to your website (without paying) through organic search engine results.
- **Digital advertising, including paid social and display ads:** Using the internet as a means to deliver to target, build awareness, and acquire new customers.

- **Organic social media:** Creating interest in your brand/product/service through social channels like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram
- **Content marketing:** Creating and sharing content (such as blogs or videos) that doesn't explicitly promote your brand/product/service, but positions you as a trusted authority in the space
- **Email marketing:** A way to better way to develop relationships with your target audience. Outreach can include; monthly newsletters, promotional outreach or campaign updates.

The cost of different digital outreach channels depends heavily on the size of the outreach effort, so the most useful metric to keep in mind is cost per action/acquisition (CPA). You should always compare your CPA against the value that the action/acquisition generates — in a for-profit scenario, for instance, it is common to balance how much you're spending on the action of user acquisition with the lifetime value of the acquired customer.

Nonprofits can employ this strategy by tracking their key areas of impact and trying to quantify it. With our GetCalFresh program (which you'll read about later in this report), we can say that with \$5 CPAs and a roughly 50% approval rate we are paying \$10 to get a family food assistance. The average benefit comes out to \$150 per month, so our \$10 CPA is quite low compared to the relative benefit that our average client receives.

Run experiments to gather data and test ideas.

How do you run worthwhile experiments on a tight budget? How do you experiment safely when there are inherent risks, including spending part of your budget on ads that you're not sure will convert? To learn the answers to those questions, you should first answer this one: How can you run inexpensive experiments to learn which channels will be most effective for your outreach?

How to Run Digital Outreach Experiments with a Small Budget and Big Goals

Running an experiment is a great way to gather data and test ideas. One big consideration is whether your organization has the bandwidth to manage experiments and how you can adapt to fit them into your existing process. One size doesn't fit all organizations when it comes to experimenting with digital outreach, and that's OK. A framework we've found useful is the Bullseye Framework, detailed in the 2015 book *Traction: How Any Startup Can Achieve Explosive Customer Growth* by Gabriel Weinberg and Justin Mares¹. It's a guide written in a commercial context, but it can be applied to digital outreach efforts beyond there. You can build your own approach on top of these basic steps, iterating with each cycle.

Step 1: Brainstorm and research

Start by pushing aside any ideas you might have about what might work, and think about everything that could be possible. Gather your team and brainstorm ideas in all 19 different types of outreach channels. This is the outer ring of the bullseye, what might work. The book gives examples of what's been known to work in different applications and industries.

Step 2: Run quick traction tests

Run a quick (less than a month) and cheap (less than \$1,000) [traction test](#). (For an example of how we implemented it, see the Clear My Record section.) This advice has worked for us: *split up the problem space into the smallest practical area, then go big on it*. For this step, the point is to get answers to the questions:

1. "How much will it cost to acquire customers through this channel? **(Cost)**
2. How many customers are available through this channel? **(Reach)**
3. Are the customers that you are getting through this channel the kind of customers that you want right now?" **(Targeting)**



You'll only know which channels work for you once you gather some data. This phase gets your team off to a good start. Evidence-based decision making can help you get real data on different ideas, rather than debating abstractly which ones seem to have the most potential.

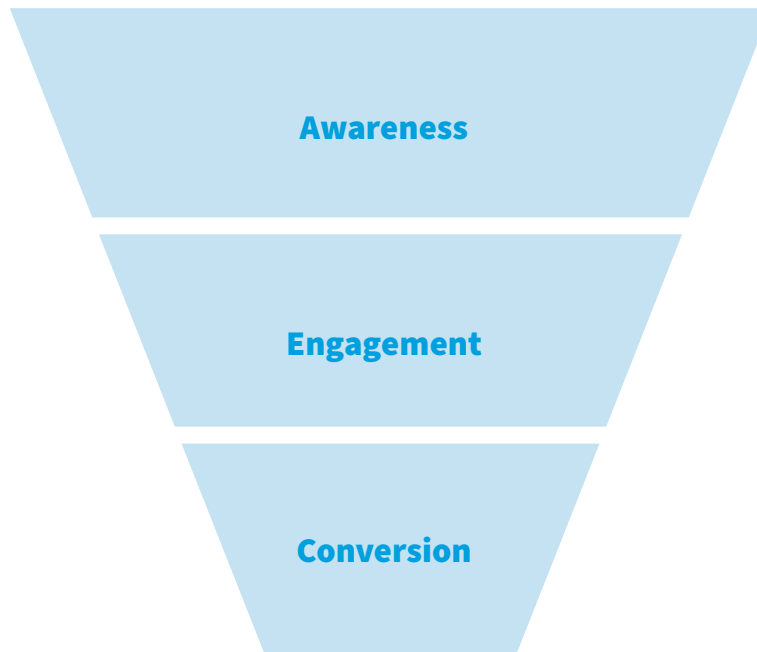
Step 3: Focus on what worked

What did you learn in Phase 2? If you didn't see results or have to abandon your experiments, start back at the outer ring with the next set of ideas. If you did see results, move your winner to the bullseye and focus entirely on that as long as it bears fruit.

Often, the best channel changes over time as you grow, so when you're seeing diminishing returns, start over.

In the digital marketing world, this is a fairly safe process for placing bets, running experiments, and going hard after the winner when you find your bullseye channel. This gives you a quick, evidence-based way to find out which channels work for you before you pour gas on the fire.

¹ You can also find the gist of it in a 2015 Medium article, "The Bullseye Framework for Getting Traction."



Effective digital outreach is one part of a larger, goal-focused strategy.

Outreach has an end point: the people you reach take some action. What happens at the end of the “funnel”? What is the outcome you are pursuing in your outreach, and how can you measure it to test the effectiveness of your approaches? For GetCalFresh, the top of the funnel is awareness of the program that comes from seeing digital ads; the middle of the funnel is engagement with those ads (i.e., clicking through to GetCalFresh.org); and the end of the funnel is when a person submits their CalFresh application through the website. Tracking outcomes matters; great outreach won’t improve outcomes if it’s coupled with a poor experience.

What we call “stigma,” when you really sit down with people and hear the reasons behind their feelings, can be boiled down to specific fears or worries about the experience. Word of a bad experience travels quicker and lingers longer in a community than a good one. For example, the State of California stopped fingerprinting for food stamps in 2011, but still some people believe it

is a requirement.

The impact of effective outreach and screening will always be constrained if you can’t make the process that people will have to deal with easier for them. Outreach is limited in what it can do when access to the service has either been very difficult for an extended period of time, or the service itself was so terrible for some people that it acquired a bad reputation.

A highly effective digital outreach strategy can feel like a win, but if it keeps delivering people to a bad service or experience, word will spread, and your subsequent outreach efforts will suffer. It’s not just about digital outreach *about* a service — the service delivery itself should be tied to the appropriate digital channels (that is, if you’re reaching out to low-income people via their smartphones, the service itself should also be accessible on a smartphone).

Case Studies

The two case studies that follow illustrate that not only is it possible to reach marginalized populations through a variety of digital outreach channels, but that you can do so effectively in terms of both volume and budget. Digital strategies are also necessary to reach some of the most marginalized people in our communities.

GetCalFresh



Background

Code for America operates GetCalFresh as a service in partnership with the State of California and more than half of California counties. The goal of GetCalFresh is to close the participation gap in CalFresh, California's implementation of the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), also commonly known as food stamps.

About two million Californians are not receiving the food assistance for which they are eligible. In 2014, the USDA estimated California had a SNAP participation rate of 66% of all eligible people, and 51% of all eligible working poor people, defined as living in a household in which one or more members earn money from a job.² As of this writing the participation rate has increased to 70% in California, but that still leaves many unserved low-income households. GetCalFresh aims to remedy this by reaching people who are not on the program and giving them an easy, dignified, online, and mobile-first way to apply for and keep their benefits.

The front door of GetCalFresh is a mobile-first website which, after a quick and permissive eligibility check, guides people through the application process in about 10 minutes, then submits the application to the correct

county office for processing. The website is designed to provide a good experience to users who are on older phones as well as those who have slow or very limited data. GetCalFresh has restructured the application to be as simple as possible (while still capturing all of the necessary information), with each question delivered in straightforward, plain language.

But GetCalFresh is much more than a website — it's an engine for getting people food. From the moment a client reaches GetCalFresh, we do everything we can to help them through the process and understand what barriers they face. We use live chat to assist people with any questions they have as they complete the form, and we follow up with surveys and interviews. We also coordinate with each county partner to get a timely and detailed picture of the rest of the process, in order to ensure high quality applications that are likely to result in approved benefits.

GetCalFresh started operating in San Francisco County, California in 2015. For the first two years, the team was entirely focused on building, measuring, and iterating to create this engine, slowly but steadily expanding to new counties and iterating toward a service that would work across all county contexts. By early 2017, GetCalFresh was in 10 counties, primarily in and around the Bay Area, and was submitting about 200 applications per week. Clients loved the experience, and our county partners believed in the value of the service. But to meet our lofty goal of closing the SNAP participation gap, we needed to expand to more counties while simultaneously reaching

² United States Department of Agriculture. [Reaching Those in Need: Estimates of State Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Participation Rates in 2015](https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/ops/Reaching2014.pdf). <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/ops/Reaching2014.pdf>

more people in each county (which would demonstrate impact, and bring in new county partners). It was time to focus on growth.

Getting started with SEM: County websites and Google Ad Grants

Our county partners' websites were among our earliest referrers in our digital outreach journey for GetCalFresh. The goal was to rely upon counties as a source of trust while providing residents with a mobile-first way to apply. This was a good place to start, because links from government websites also help with search rankings.³ These links resulted in decent volume in some counties, but volume depended on traffic to the county website as well as how prominently it featured GetCalFresh.

At the same time, we knew that 40% of Google searches for food assistance occurred on a mobile device and wanted to advertise to residents when they were looking for help. Google Ad Grants provided \$10,000 per month to start digital outreach using Google Search Ads. (Pro tip: if you work at a nonprofit, it's worth checking whether your organization qualifies for Google for Nonprofits.)

At less than \$5 per submitted application, Google Ads were effective from a cost per acquisition (CPA) standpoint. We targeted the ads by county and set one broad Spanish campaign across all counties in which we were working. Still, volume was limited — was there nothing more to get or was it due to limitations in the Ad Grants account?

Search Engine Marketing (SEM):
Buying traffic through paid search listings

Google Keywords | Reaching eligible residents

The Food Stamp Act of 1964 launched to improve low-income households nutrition and strengthen the agricultural economy. The program was widely known as “food stamps” for nearly 50 years, before the name was changed to SNAP in an effort to reduce associated social stigma. In 2010 California changed the name of the program again, and it's now known as CalFresh. There has been a large push by community based organizations, government staff, and advocates to increase awareness of the program to potentially eligible residents and refrain from using “food stamps” in any outreach materials.

To increase online applications, GetCalFresh launched a series of keywords via the Google Keyword Planner tool to advertise to residents at the moment they were looking for resources. We used phrases that reflected how people referred to the program like “CalFresh”, “food assistance”, and “food stamps” in order to evaluate what would be the most cost-effective way to encourage residents to check their eligibility and apply. While partner organizations discourage us from using “food stamps” to describe the program, we've found that this term is the most cost effective way to reach people. “Food stamps,” while carrying some stigma, also has very strong brand recognition and reflects how most people still know the program.

³ To learn more about link building strategies, see *The Beginner's Guide to SEO*, specifically Chapter 7, *Growing Popularity and Links*, by Moz. <https://moz.com/beginners-guide-to-seo/growing-popularity-and-links>

Pumping up the volume: Google AdWords + Bing

In June of 2017, we started a limited experiment: we moved San Francisco County from the Ad Grants account to a paid AdWords account. (You'll read more about this switch in the Data Dive section below, but it's important to note that this approach might not yield the same results for all nonprofit or government organizations, and in some cases Google Ad Grants is the best available deal.) As mentioned in the section on running digital experiments, we approached the paid AdWords account with the second ring of the Bullseye Method in mind, seeing what we could discover in about a month with about \$1,000. This advice has worked for us: split up the problem space into the smallest practical area — in this case, one county — then go big on it.

We picked lots of recommended keywords, all broad matches, and chose the “Maximize clicks” automated bidding strategy in AdWords. (For more information on automated bidding, see Google's AdWords Help documentation — it's full of tutorials for beginners.) We didn't even set up conversion tracking, we just cross-referenced the data in Google Analytics and Mixpanel, another user analytics tool we already had for the Code for America website.

After four weeks, we had spent about \$1,500 for a yield of four times the previous traffic in San Francisco County. This was far higher volume for slightly costlier CPAs than the Grants account had yielded.

We decided the increase in volume made it worthwhile to switch the other counties to traditional AdWords accounts, which we did in July. For this next phase, we focused on getting as much traffic as possible. At this point we weren't too concerned about efficiency or lowering our CPAs, but we'll return to that at the end of this case study.

Social tips and lessons learned:

- 1. Social ads work differently than AdWords** — *there's no search intent, and people are just scrolling for updates, so they may be less likely to follow through. There are many ways to tweak social ads with “intent marketing” strategies, but as with many things, your mileage may vary.*
- 2. Refresh your content.** *This does two things: 1) it keeps costs low, since they go up over time as more people see the ad, and 2) it prevents people from getting tired of it. Think about what you do when you see the same ad over and over — you tune it out. So, prepare a few costume changes over the life of your ad campaign, with fresh graphics and messaging.*
- 3. Target like crazy.** *Facebook has rich targeting options, so you can focus on specific segments of people for brief campaigns. (We tried AdWords and Bing for this purpose, but Facebook has been the most effective.) This makes it great for event promotion. Also, by targeting down to the zip code level and through trial and error, we got to a level of spend that performs at a good CPA of about \$5 as a general campaign across all counties. Pro tip: Facebook doesn't have county targeting, but zip codes are the next best thing, especially compared to trying to pick cities with the right radii. Zillow has zip codes that are easy to copy and paste into Facebook, and you can save lists of zip codes by county for easy re-use.*
- 4. Try Instagram ads.** *Instagram had surprisingly low CPAs, and it's easy to set up if you're already running ads in Facebook — just enable it within Facebook's Ad Manager. This is definitely worth trying, but before you run the experiment, make sure your assets look good on the platform.*

By the end of 2017 we became, thanks in large part to AdWords, responsible for nearly 60% of all online applications to CalFresh in partner counties and over 20% of all applications in those counties, including all channels (paper, in-person, etc.).

What about Bing?

We've talked a lot about Google ads, but it's not the only game in town. Depending on who your target audience is and how they search online, you could be missing a lot of people. For instance, Internet Explorer is the default browser for all Windows devices, and Bing is the default search engine. Might we reach different demographics by advertising through Bing?

We experimented with Bing and in the end, our results yielded about 1/10 the volume as AdWords; but it was fairly easy to import everything from AdWords to Bing and reach an expanded audience. CPAs have generally been higher with Bing, although that could be because we focused less energy on optimizing them because of the lower volume.

Bottom line: if you have to choose between AdWords and Bing, choose AdWords for the sheer volume, but know that Bing is a good secondary place to get traffic.

Going social: Facebook and Instagram

In the beginning, we ran some early Facebook campaigns, but saw CPAs at \$20 and up — not great. Later, when we set up conversion tracking and switched to a campaign targeted at conversions, costs went down. Creating a Lookalike Audience within Facebook Ads to more accurately target lowered costs further. (See the [Facebook Ads Help Center](#) for information and tutorials.) After that, turning on Instagram Ads got us into the \$5-10 range, where we wanted to be.

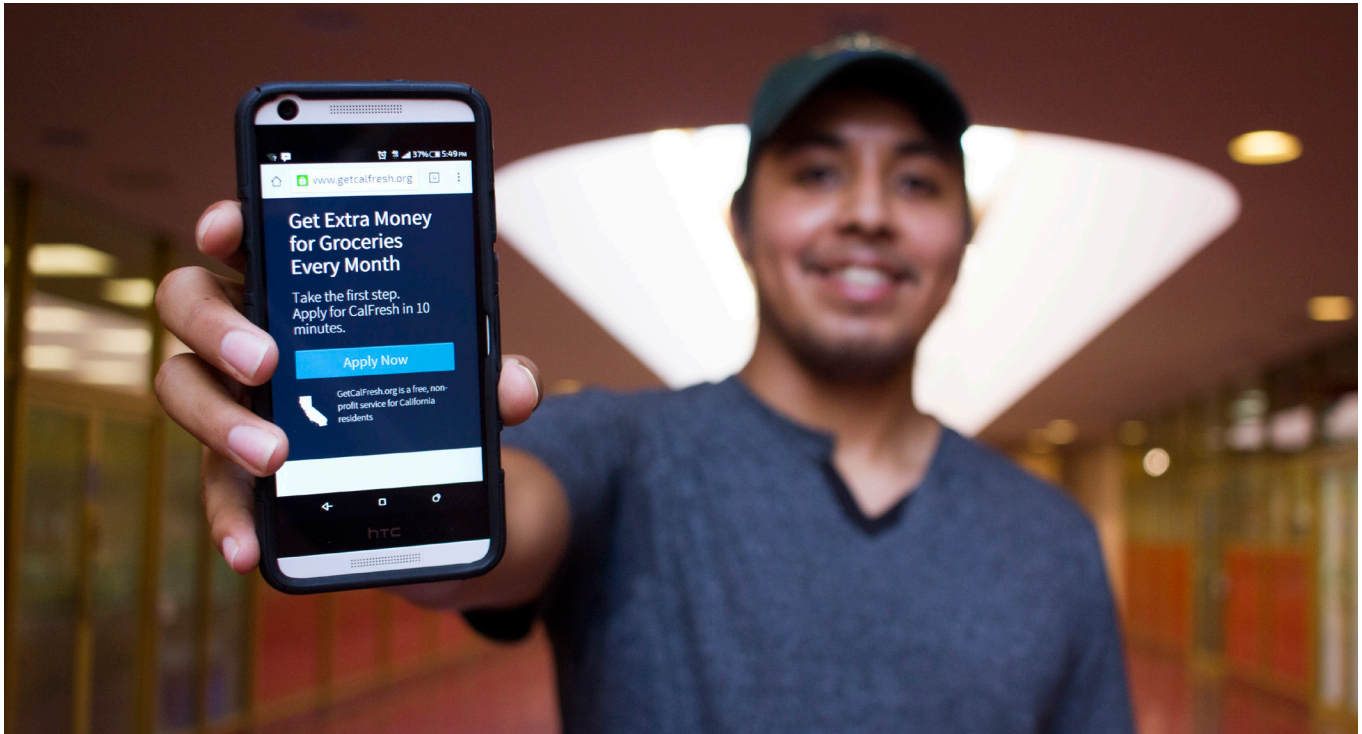
Controlling costs: Customer acquisition cost optimization

How much can we afford? What's a good cost per acquisition (CPA)? There are lots of industry benchmarks, but how do you compare them to government or non-profits? It's difficult when there's not much of an analogous way to measure the lifetime value of a customer — how do you put a price tag on helping feed a family?

At this point in our outreach, we were getting \$5-10 CPAs, which is pretty great compared to most industry benchmarks (see Figure 3 under Data Dive above). On the other hand, we were spending way too much money per month, though we thought the cost was worth our increased impact in the short term. Since we were regularly adding counties — we are currently in 32 counties in California, accounting for almost half of the state's eligible population — that meant we had to consistently get more efficient with our spending.

The following CPA cost control techniques have worked for the GetCalFresh team:

- 1. Regularly groom each campaign.** *Identify high-cost keywords and keywords with low-quality scores, and update bids or content for improvements. Look at search terms for high cost keywords, and add negative keywords to cut down on irrelevant searches (e.g., "Which restaurants accept EBT?").*
- 2. Get to know your analytics to drive up ad yields and drive down costs over time.** *Through Google AdWords and Analytics, you can track and measure to your quality scores, cost per click (CPC), cost per acquisition (CPA), click-through rates (CTR), and overall search rank.*



- 3. Create a new campaign structure.** *With the help of our Google AdGrants contacts, we devised a new campaign structure based on what we had learned. What worked: setting CPC bidding to manual instead of automatic so we could set our own maximum cost per click, mostly with phrase and exact-match keywords, plus tighter bids and better coordination between keyword and ad copy.*
- 4. Experiment with AdWords.** *AdWords has a great experiments feature that allows you to split test two versions of a campaign, so you can get more data before putting all your eggs in one basket. We tested the new structure in a couple of mid-size counties, then tweaked it until we got as good or better volume at a much reduced CPA. Only then did we roll it out to more counties.*
- 5. Tweak your bids and keywords to fit locations and demographics.** *Most counties improved with the aforementioned new structure, but some didn't. In counties with bigger cities (and more competition generally) we got our reduced cost, but also lost sig-*

nificant volume. So we repeated the experimentation phase to continue to tweak bids and keywords until we got within 10% of our original volume and still had a 40% CPA savings.

We're at a point now where we suspect we might have hit the limit on AdWords paid ad efficiency, so to get further savings we may need to focus on improving organic search. Search engine optimization (SEO) is a tactic that typically works best in tandem with paid acquisitions, and can be extremely valuable in driving down keyword costs. You want to create content that is "readable" for both the humans who will see your ads and the search engines that will determine your page rankings. It's easy to set up Google Analytics, and their Keyword Planner tool is incredibly helpful in setting up benchmarks to track search volume. As we keep experimenting and learning, we'll continue to share our findings.

Data Dive:

The Evolution of GetCalFresh Outreach in San Diego County

by Lou Moore, Chief Technology Officer at Code for America

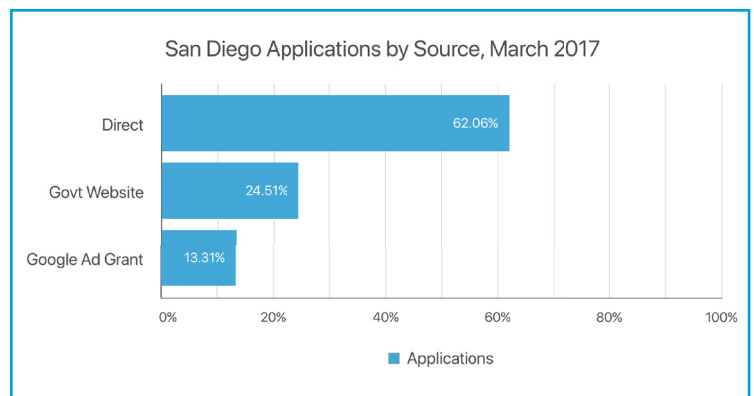
In March of 2017, 1,660 Californians used GetCalFresh to apply for food benefits across the state. Of those, almost half were residents of our largest partner county, San Diego. Fast-forward a year and GetCalFresh has grown nearly 10x, handling over 15,000 monthly applications. Some of that growth has come from launching the service in new counties, but we've also expanded our outreach in early partner counties like San Diego, using new techniques to reach a broader audience. In March of 2018, we helped over 3,000 people apply for CalFresh in San Diego alone. This is the story of our growth in San Diego County and of the people we serve and the means we use to reach them. [Note: We collect data on how applicants reach our website, the devices they access the site from, the preferred language they indicate on their application, their housing stability, and their age demographic. We do not collect data on race or ethnicity.]

Setting the stage, March 2017

We had just a few outreach channels in place in March 2017. The majority, about 62%, of our San Diego application volume was classified as "Direct". This included people who had heard about GetCalFresh from word of mouth, discovered the site from organic internet searches (that is, not from advertisements), or perhaps were assisted by a Community-Based Organization (CBO) like a food bank. We would later work on differentiating these in our analytics to measure the contribution of each of these sources, as you'll see in more recent data, and this is a practice I'd highly recommend.

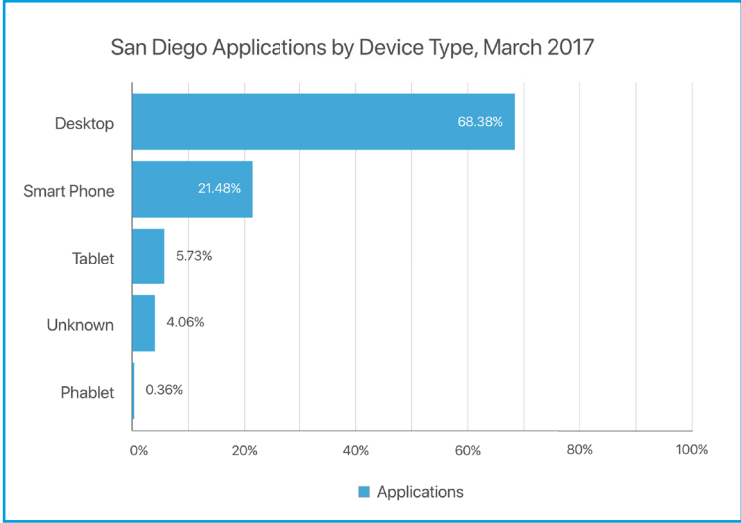
The second biggest source of early applications, about 25%, was a link placed on the San Diego County Health & Human Services (HHS) website. Official government website placements like this one were significant early traffic drivers as well as important milestones in establishing trust and credibility with our partners and clients. But as we'll see, the number of people who know to proactively go to these official sites is dwarfed by those we would learn to reach by other means.

Our third channel, accounting for the remaining 13% of applications, was Google AdWords via a Google Ad Grants account. If it's available to you, this kind of account is a fantastic way to get started with digital advertising. You can learn how AdWords works and experiment at no cost, and depending on your domain, you may get great results too.



So in the early days, our outreach strategies were pretty simple. But where were we reaching people? Let's take a look at our San Diego applicants by the kind of device they used to access the GetCalFresh site.

One thing that jumps out of this early data is how heavily our users at this point were skewed towards desktop computer access as opposed to mobile. From our research, we knew that mobile mattered — 90% of low-income Americans use mobile, 80% of seniors use mobile, and 11% of applicants told us that a smartphone was their only form of internet access. These figures coupled with the lack of any usable mobile-responsive application led us to focus on a great mobile experience for GetCalFresh. But despite all of that, we were still largely reaching desktop users, and interestingly our online advertising through the Google Ad Grants account was skewed even more heavily towards desktop usage than the San Diego County website. Growing our mobile reach would have to be a focus of our growth efforts going forward.



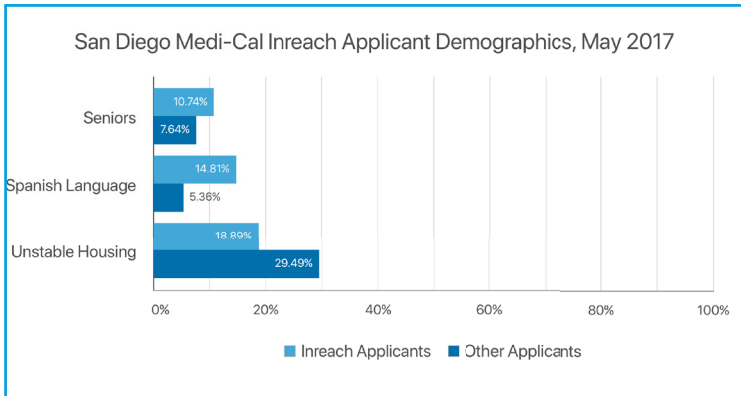
Medi-Cal inreach, May 2017

In April 2017 we worked with San Diego HHS to implement Medi-Cal inreach. Our partners at the county would identify new Medi-Cal applicants who likely also qualified for CalFresh, and send them text messages with a link to GetCalFresh so they could easily apply. By May this new channel added 270 new applications, pushing our San Diego total above 1,000 in a month for the first time.

We found that our inreach efforts were significantly more effective in reaching Spanish-speaking households, and slightly more effective at reaching seniors. Medi-Cal inreach would become an important outreach channel in San Diego going forward, and it's a practice we are continuing to expand to new counties based on this success.

Google Knowledge Card, June 2017

In June 2017 we worked with Google to launch a CalFresh knowledge card into their search results. This meant anyone




searching for certain terms like 'food stamps' would see a detailed overview of the SNAP program to the right of their search results, and with the blessing of our California state government partners, we were able to link this card to GetCalFresh.

Because GetCalFresh was only available in some of the counties in California, hosting this traffic required us to quickly build a separate landing page where applicants could choose their county and be redirected to the appropriate web application if they couldn't be served by GetCalFresh. We tracked analytics on visitors to the new landing page that could be shared with our government partners to give them more insight into who was searching for food stamps online.

Because of our strong relationship with the California De-

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)





Also called: food stamps



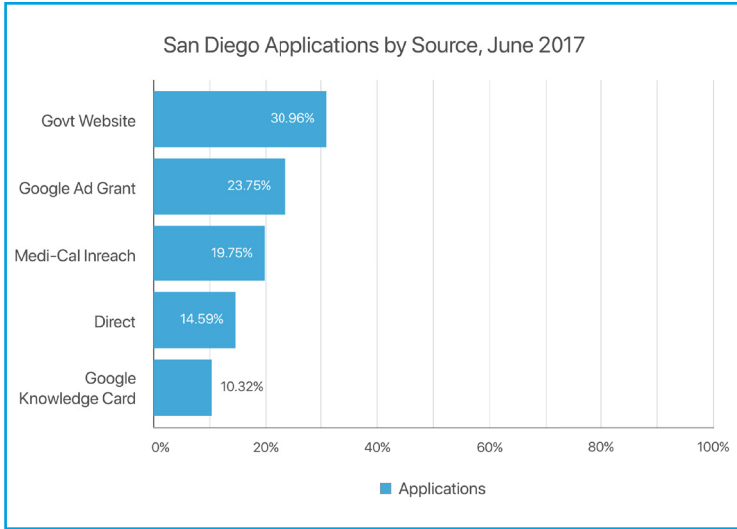
SNAP provides a monthly supplement for purchasing nutritious food. If you qualify, you'll get a debit card to use for groceries.

[See eligibility requirements \(usda.gov\).](#)

State
California ▾

-  **Apply online** go.getcalfresh.org
-  **Call CalFresh Information Line**
877-847-3663
-  **Local office locations**
-  **Download application**

Source: [CalFresh](#)

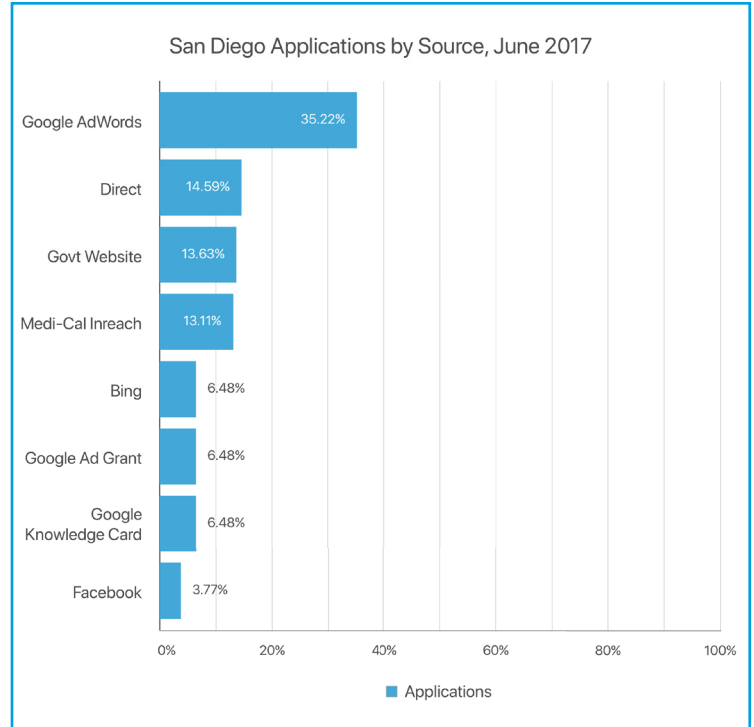


partment of Social Services and our ability to quickly turn around quality tech with analytic visibility built in, we were able to take advantage of this opportunity to reach more people.

Paid ads with AdWords, Facebook, and Bing, July 2017

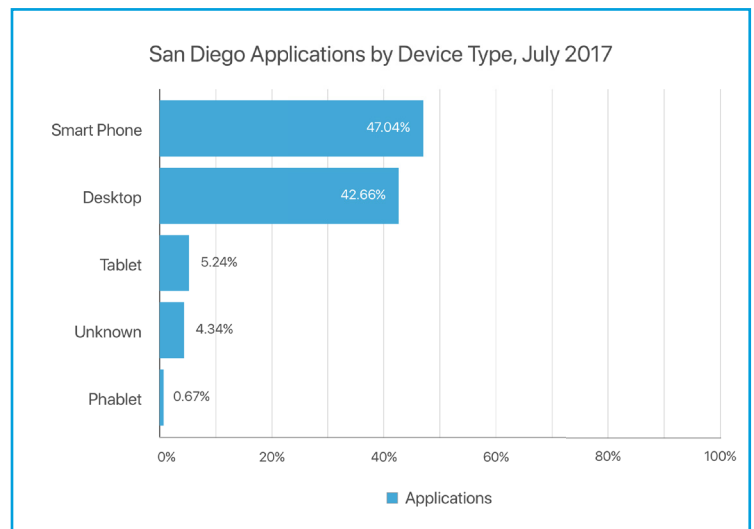
By the end of June 2017, we were growing steadily and our outreach channels were starting look a little different. We served almost 1,200 applicants, and the new Medi-Cal Inreach and the Google Knowledge Card channels accounted for about 20% and 10% of our applicants respectively. But we knew we needed to reach more people to work towards our goal of closing the CalFresh participation gap.

We knew that people were searching for terms like ‘food stamps’, ‘calfresh’, and ‘EBT cards’ from our early success with Google Ad Grants. We also knew that the Ad Grants account came with some important limitations including how much we could bid on the most effective keywords. So it was reasonable to hypothesize that we could get more out of our Search Engine Marketing (SEM) efforts if we were willing to spend some of our funds and bid more aggressively on some keywords. In true iterative and data driven fashion, we started with a really simple test: opening a new paid Google AdWords account and setting up a single county campaign with the same keywords we had been using, but with higher budgets and maximum bids. We work in a cash-constrained environment, but the small scope of the initial test allowed us to be comfortable with the cost without needing to think too much about optimization at this early stage.



This initial test, which we ran in San Francisco County, showed immediate results. We got 10 applications from our Google Ad Grants account the week before we launched the paid account. The following week, we had nearly tripled our Google applications with a total of 29. After a few more weeks of experimentation and refinement, we would reach a rate of 70 Google applications a week in San Francisco alone. We were ready to expand this new channel to new counties, including San Diego.

Largely on the strength of the new AdWords campaigns, we



would exceed 2,000 applications just in San Diego in July 2017. We got some additional lift from Bing, and also started experimenting with Facebook ads during this time. And finally, our direct traffic grew more than 2x from June, most likely due to increased awareness from our paid campaigns.

At this point, our outreach channels have taken on an entirely different composition from earlier in the year. And this would have an impact on who were reaching as well, starting with a significant shift towards mobile users.

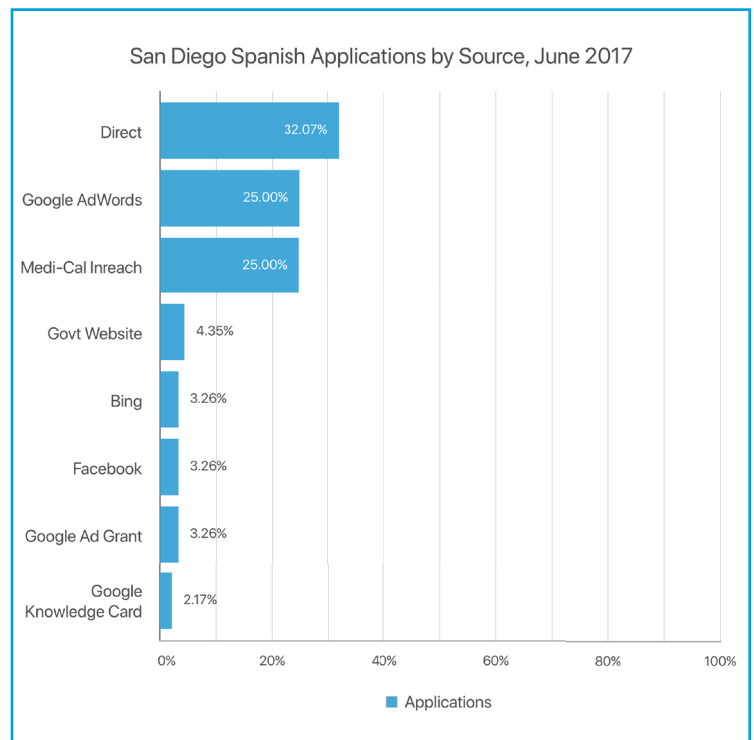
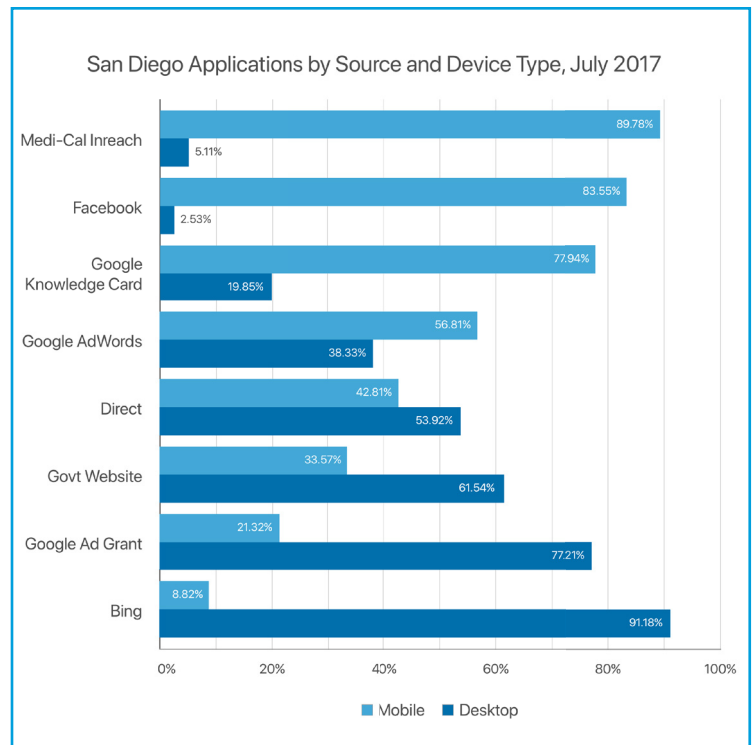
In just a few months, we had gone from a primarily desktop audience to majority mobile. The SMS-based Medi-Cal Inreach campaign was of course a big mobile contributor, and Facebook showed some early promise that was almost entirely mobile-focused. The Google Knowledge Card was also primarily driving mobile traffic.

The new AdWords campaign was driving the most mobile volume though — while it still reached a good number of desktop users, it was far more mobile-focused than the Google Ad Grants account had been in the past.

We also saw a large improvement in our ability to reach Spanish-speaking applicants. About 9% of applicants indicated a preference for Spanish in July 2017, up from just 3.5% back in March. The biggest contributor was Direct, but Medi-Cal Inreach and our AdWords campaigns also made a meaningful impact. We were running a Spanish-language campaign within AdWords that, while small compared to the English-speaking campaigns, was making a difference.

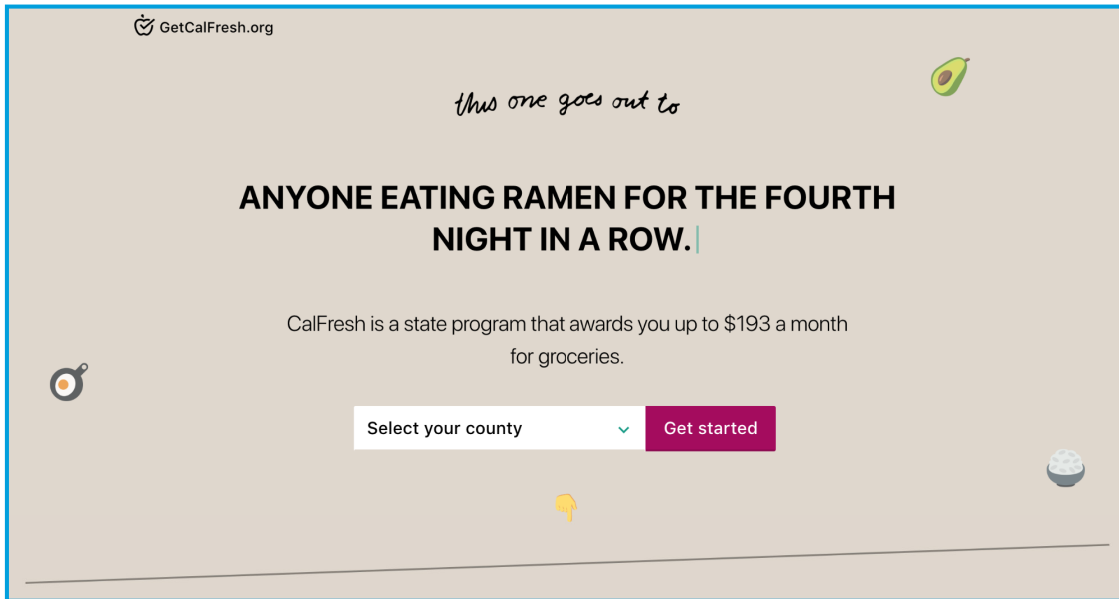
Back to school, September 2017

College students as a group have lower than average SNAP participation rates, and in our research we found that this was due to a lack of awareness and stigma. In September 2017 we launched a fully customized landing page experience for students, with messaging intended to reduce the perception of stigma. This was a first-of-its-kind outreach



tool for us which we could use to drive targeted ad traffic to or put into the hands of our partners on the ground in Community-Based Organizations.

We have to take a brief detour from San Diego to see the



impact this outreach strategy had. While some student applications would come in from San Diego students, it was in other counties with active campus food clinics that we saw the biggest lift. We also experimented with Facebook ads targeted at specific colleges in some counties. Both of these strategies would pay off. For example, a UC Berkeley food security mega-clinic in Alameda county would drive over 200 student applications in a single day. In Yolo County, a targeted UC Davis Facebook ad campaign would result in 73 student applications over a 2 week period.

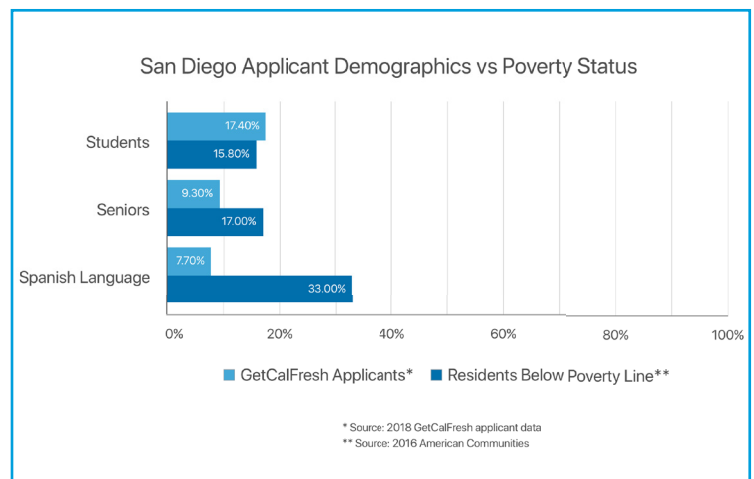
From the start, we've worked closely with partners on the ground at Community-Based Organizations to help people marginalized to food insecurity. The custom student experience demonstrated how effective a combination of digital and on-the-ground outreach tools could be. At the same time, we learned that Facebook had the potential to be a particularly great digital tool for precisely targeting underserved groups.

2018 and beyond

We came a long way in 2017, growing our impact tremendously and learning a great deal about what works in the world of digital outreach. We demonstrated that we can help people get the benefits they need at scale, and that we can better serve specific populations like students with focused outreach work.

The work continues, and there are many eligible Californians

we have yet to reach. Helping seniors and Spanish-speaking households as effectively as we are students is a goal for 2018. We're expanding our data and research efforts as well and diving deep to better understand the lived experience of students, seniors, Spanish-speaking and mixed-immigration families, and the homeless. We now have a set of digital outreach tools at our disposal that we can deploy in service of meeting the needs of these and other underserved commu-



nities as we continue to work towards closing the CalFresh participation gap.

Clear My Record



Background

Since April 2016, Clear My Record (CMR) helps eligible people in California get their criminal records reduced or dismissed.⁴ This is a lot of people — California voters and legislators have taken action in recent years to expand eligibility for reclassification, sealing, and dismissal of convictions, so that now an estimated five million people are eligible for some form of conviction relief. Record clearance makes a big difference in people’s everyday lives, affecting employment, housing, government services, college admissions, and more.

Record clearance is a complicated process with many obstacles that the individual seeking to clear their record are required to overcome. Indeed, in California, there are 4,800 legal obstacles that exist for someone with a criminal record — obstacles like the ability to get a job, access financial aid, get a loan, etc. It is no surprise, then, that there is an implementation gap between the laws that entitled individuals to relief from the collateral consequences of a criminal record and those individuals actually receiving that relief. The reason that people do not access these remedies at scale is because they do not know they are eligible, and even where they do, it is unclear on how to do so and it costs too much money. In addition, the process takes far too long when the individual

needs to respond an urgent event in their life, like being denied a job, professional licensing, housing, etc. (For more on the Clear My Record project, read our report [Closing the Delivery Gap.](#))

When we tried to apply the digital outreach lessons we learned delivering GetCalFresh, we found that people don’t frequently search directly for record clearance online. We ask applicants how they heard about Clear My Record directly on the application form, and most report that they discovered it through a friend, a criminal justice actor like a public defender’s office, or our official referral partnership with background check company Checkr (more on that later).

This is when we realized a key distinction between our Clear My Record and GetCalFresh clients through the lens of digital marketing principles of acquisition vs. activation. **Acquisition** is bringing in users who are actively searching for something online (like people searching for “food stamps” or “EBT” online). **Activation** requires targeting users who aren’t actively searching for what you have, but have a need for it (like a person searching for a job who faces barriers to employment like a criminal record). Search advertising tends to be more effective in acquisition marketing.

Partly for that reason, paid search wasn’t as effective as it had been for GetCalFresh. It still helped, but had higher CPAs, around \$15-20, and lower volume. So, we brainstormed: could there be better channels for this use case?

⁴ *The scope of this case study is limited to our digital outreach efforts, but this is a big, ongoing project for Code for America. For those interested in more information, stay tuned for an in-depth report we’ll soon be releasing thanks to the Public Welfare Foundation and the State Bar of California.*

Clear My Record

Finding new outreach channels

If you're unsure which growth channels are going to work best for your service, it's helpful to have a framework to aid you in choosing your experiments and some guidelines for how much time and money to spend on them. In this case, we used the Bullseye Framework.

We tried a variety of methods, including tabling at job fairs, partnering with clean slate clinic and fairs, and flyering at courts and in probation offices. Online methods we tried included:

- email outreach to organizations that serve people with records, including schools, labor unions, community colleges, and health clinics
- links on our partner websites and other government and community websites
- advertising on substance abuse recovery blogs
- partnerships with background check companies and their customers to promote CMR to job seekers with convictions
- digital ads on Facebook, Google, and Craigslist.

For the Clear My Record team, the following channels made it to the bullseye and provided a consistent, cost-effective return: 1) Craigslist jobs ads promoting CMR, 2) partnerships with background check companies and their customers to promote CMR to job seekers with convictions, and 3) links on partner websites. Using these strategies, we were able to begin consistently delivering about 650 applications per month to our partners at a cost of \$3.50 per application.

Targeting job seekers with Craigslist

Our first winner out of this process was posting ads on Craigslist in metropolitan areas that CMR serves. We

posted ads in the jobs section speaking to people who were actively looking for jobs that might have background checks as a requirement. A typical ad would be posted in a category like general labor, retail, or transportation with a subject like, "Free help to clear your criminal record and get a job."

This proved to be our most effective method of outreach, bringing in 41% of total applications by the close of 2017. We think Craigslist ads are effective because they reach people in the midst of their job search, when they're at a point where they may be worried about how their record will impact their ability to find work. They're also wary of scams, as evidenced by a number of people who responded to the Craigslist ad not by clicking the link in it but by emailing the anonymized Craigslist email. They were surprised and relieved to find an actual human on the other side. This became a great user research tool as we corresponded back and forth with questions and answers.

Google AdWords was also effective at reaching applicants — 18% of our applicants arrived via Google AdWords. However, it cost twice as much per conversion than Craigslist due to competition with for-profit expungement law firms. This is an unfortunate reality of search engine marketing: companies or organizations with bigger budgets have the potential to crowd out those with smaller budgets.

One in three CMR site visitors from Craigslist completes an application, compared to fewer than one in ten visitors from Google, which itself delivers about 18% of our applicants. Our hypothesis behind this discrepancy is that people on Craigslist are looking for jobs, and our ad is very descriptive and targeted at job seekers. Visitors from Google, on the other hand, might just be looking for information about what our site does. 33% is a pretty amazing conversion rate, and it's extremely affordable. Craigslist job posting fees vary by area, ranging from \$7 to \$75 per posting.

Clear My Record

Right place at the right time: Checkr (and Uber)

Business development is one outreach channel to consider, and in this case it was a valuable one. We researched partnerships that would enable us to help people right at the time they needed it most as they were trying to apply for a job. It turns out, ridesharing services and other jobs that use automated background checks are interested in helping good candidates who failed a background check get their records cleared so they can be employed.

So we formed a partnership with Checkr, a startup that provides background check services to many on-demand economy companies, including Uber, their largest client. Checkr is starting to expand to other industries and, because of our work, now has an arrangement with Uber and a group of other customers to help job applicants with convictions on their records.

When Checkr discovers a criminal record on the application of someone in one of CMR's partner counties, an email is sent to that applicant letting them know they might be able to clear up their conviction using CMR. The only cost of this partnership to Code for America was the time we spent meeting with Checkr and Uber to decide how the arrangement would work, plus drafting the email to job seekers. Once we got the partnership up and running, it was almost free, and yielded a similar conversion rate to the Craigslist ads.

Currently, 36% of CMR site visitors from Checkr submit an application to us, and these applicants make up 15% of total application volume. We think this high conversion rate happens for the same reason Craigslist ads are effective — we're able to reach people at a critical point in their job search.

Linking on partner websites

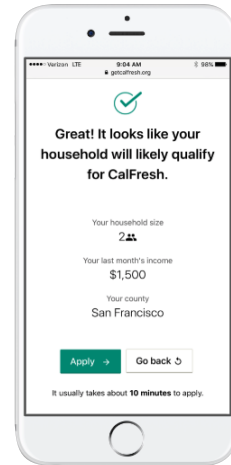
We also strongly encouraged our county and legal aid partners to link to Clear My Record from their websites in order to quickly reach people who want to learn about how to clear their records. We found that the number of applications that result from those county website links depends on factors such as traffic to those websites, and the prominence of the CMR link within that site. Taken together, though, county websites are driving 19% of CMR applications.

Conclusion

These are only two case studies in digital outreach for two specific programs that serve marginalized populations. There are countless different ways to reach the people you are trying to help — it's up to you to determine what tactics will work best for your budget and your organization as a whole. But we hope that our findings have helped demonstrate the possibilities of leveraging traditional digital marketing strategies to effectively reach populations that are in need of nonprofit and government services, and that you can take these learnings and determine how to best implement them to achieve your goals.

Resources and Further Reading

1. Traction: How Any Startup Can Achieve Explosive Customer Growth by *Gabriel Weinberg and Justin Mares, 2015*. A short summary of the Bullseye Framework can also be found in [The Bullseye Framework for Getting Traction](#) by Gabriel Weinberg. Published Sep. 27, 2015 on Medium.
2. [The Beginner's Guide to SEO](#) by Moz.
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5. [The Bullseye Framework for Getting Traction](#) by Gabriel Weinberg. Published Sep. 27, 2015 on Medium.
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9. [Reaching Those in Need: Estimates of State Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Participation Rates in 2015](#), by Karen Cunyningham of Mathematica Policy Research for the United States Department of Agriculture. Published January 2018.