

## **Excellence Winner**

### ***CPA Student Recruitment Campaign***

**Louise De Sina**

**American Institute of Certified Public Accountants**

**New York City, U.S.**

## **Need/Opportunity**

In 2000, the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants (AICPA) conducted a major study to track the number of students majoring, or planning to major, in accounting over the span of 10 years. Results revealed a sharp drop in students majoring in accounting.

- In 1990, 4 percent of college students were majoring in accounting, and 4 percent of high school students were planning to major in accounting.
- By 2000, college numbers had dropped to 2 percent, and high school to 1 percent.

Subsequent research among high school seniors and college students revealed ignorance, misinformation and negative perceptions towards the accounting profession. The research also indicated that students would deem the pursuit of accounting and CPA certification as valuable and “worth it” if they knew more about it. Possibly reinforcing these misconceptions and negative perceptions were the business scandals at the start of the 21st century. In addition, accounting firms were reporting a shortage of graduates to fill positions.

To reverse this alarming downward trend, the AICPA needed to change the perception of accounting and increase interest and participation in their profession among high school and early college students.

## **Intended Audience**

The campaign targets two primary target audiences (“The Millennials”):

1. High school juniors and seniors pursuing a college prep curriculum.
2. College freshmen and sophomores:
  - The college student audience is further segmented by major or intended major. As one of the objectives of the campaign is to attract incremental students to the profession, acquisition efforts focus on general business students and undeclared/undecided majors. This is where the greatest opportunity for conversion exists.

This audience is notoriously hard to reach, especially for the long term. Not only are they virtually bombarded with media, but they are also very skeptical of marketing activity, preferring a “show, don’t tell” approach. These students live in an online world, and the Internet has become the hub of much of their lives—socially and academically.

## **Goals and Objectives**

Three objectives were established, and the success of the campaign is measured against all three:

- Generate awareness and excitement about the accounting profession among students.

- Improve perceptions about the accounting profession among high school and college students.
- Attract incremental students to major in accounting and pursue CPA certification.

### **Solution Overview**

The AICPA developed a student recruitment campaign, a long-term marketing and communication effort, under the title “Start Here. Go Places.” The campaign is an innovative recruitment effort developed to foster continuous dialogue with students throughout their academic life. It is designed to raise awareness of the accounting and CPA profession, and to educate students on the benefits and rewards that can come from a career in accounting, countering the prevalent misconceptions. The campaign is designed to allow students to experience accounting firsthand in a fun and engaging environment, while delivering on the key requirements of the campaign—to educate, support and inspire.

The campaign follows the academic school year, with the majority of the communications in market during the fall (September through December) and spring (January through May) semesters, when students are most likely to be receptive to messaging.

To move students along the CPA continuum, a dynamic segmentation strategy was developed to ensure the right message was reaching the right prospect at the right time. Messaging was segmented into high school, early college and late college to provide relevance. A “surround-sound” multimedia plan was developed, reflecting students’ lifestyles and media consumption habits to generate awareness and reinforce the core campaign messages.

The web site, [www.startheregoplaces.com](http://www.startheregoplaces.com), is positioned as the guide to going places in business and accounting. It is filled with practical information and interactive elements such as polls, quizzes and online games, which help overturn negative perceptions of the profession and help students make informed decisions about their field of study and career. The site’s interface is designed in a logical way that makes it easy for the students to navigate and find what they need.

### **Implementation and Challenges**

Trying to reach a notoriously skeptical, marketing-adverse audience in a climate mired with business scandals, and with a set budget, posed a number of challenges.

Being a nonprofit organization, the campaign had to show efficiencies in media selection and channels to gain maximum impact across campuses in all 50 states. Media vehicles were chosen to reach students where they live—direct mail, e-mail; where they learn—on-campus, place-based media and posters; and where they play—interactive banners, online games and sponsorships. Resources and marketing budgets were further extended through guerilla and viral marketing tactics. The campaign also incorporated key influencers (professors and teachers) to extend the reach and reinforce the messages.

Growing up with a strong Web and technology presence in their lives, today's students are more apt to pay attention to and digest information presented in electronic media. They consume quickly and are apt to disregard material they feel is out-of-date, boring or poorly executed. StartHereGoPlaces.com is the hub of the campaign and allows students to learn more about the CPA profession and test their skills through online business simulation games. All communications drive students to this site, providing them with career information and interactive games, such as The Turnaround Game ([www.turnaroundgame.com](http://www.turnaroundgame.com)) and Catch Me If You Can ([www.catchmegame.com](http://www.catchmegame.com)), to experience the diverse roles and aspects of the accounting profession. The site contains profiles of CPAs with interesting jobs; current news articles about the profession; a salary guide; scholarship and internship information; special offers for students; job seeker resources, including interview tips; and a personality test, to add some fun.

Content within the contests, games and promotions was developed to maintain ongoing interest and student involvement. Other elements of the campaign include search engine optimization to drive qualified traffic to the web site, as well as a custom-published magazine for the early college audience as an additional means to raise awareness of the accounting profession and generate leads for the program.

### **Measurement/Evaluation**

Three primary vehicles were used to measure and evaluate the success of the campaign:

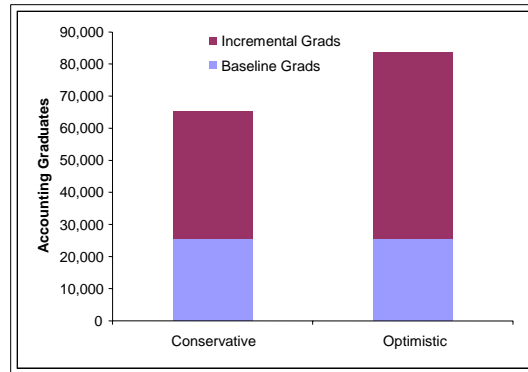
1. The student recruitment database, a program-tracking database that measures results and captures and tracks response to individual media channels and promotions, as well as migration of students along the CPA continuum.
2. An annual tracking study conducted by an independent, third-party research firm, measures changes in student attitudes, perceptions and plans concerning accounting, careers in accounting and business, and pursuit of CPA credentials.
3. The student recruitment migration model, an agency-developed mathematical simulation to project the impact of the campaign on increasing enrollment of accounting majors at universities.

The results show that the campaign has been very successful. The AICPA and the CPA profession are in the best place they have been in at least 17 years. The number of accounting graduates has more than quadrupled since the campaign's initiation, and results reveal that the campaign is successfully delivering against the three set objectives.

1. Attract incremental students to major in accounting and pursue CPA certification.
  - More than 340,000 students have registered with the program.
  - Eighty-seven percent of registered students represent incremental value to the profession—i.e., they are not already on an accounting path.
  - Sixty-eight percent of college and high school members have taken steps to pursue accounting versus 17 percent of non-members.
  - More than twice as many college members intend to pursue CPA certification (72 percent) than college non-members (46 percent).

- The migration model projects an incremental 40,000 – 58,000 accounting majors by the year 2013 (based on a five-year program), due to the CPA student recruitment campaign. This is almost the equivalent (77 percent) of an entire class of accounting graduates in a typical year.

<b>Five-year Program</b>	<b>Conservative</b>	<b>Optimistic</b>
Total program yield	65,370	83,700
Baseline migration	25,755	25,755
Net incremental yield	39,615	57,945
Gain vs. status quo	5.2%	7.6%



2. Generate awareness and excitement about the accounting profession among students.
  - Forty percent of high school members state the program has elevated their likelihood to study accounting in college.
  - Over 55 percent of members have participated in at least one of the program’s online simulation games, gaining firsthand experience about the role of a CPA.
  - Thirty-four percent of student web traffic on the site is learning specifically about the CPA profession.
3. Objective: Improve perceptions about the accounting profession among students.
  - Student members’ perceptions of accounting are significantly higher (33 percent) than non-member student perceptions.

Most important, the profession’s numbers are up. More students in college are declaring accounting as their major: up from 2 percent in 2000 to 10 percent in 2006, quintupling the number of graduates. More high school students plan to declare accounting as their major: up from 1 percent in 2000 to 5 percent in 2006, quintupling the number of incoming accounting majors.

