

Request for Proposals - Messaging and Positioning Partner

October 2026

About Summer Search

For more than 35 years, Summer Search has partnered with young people during a critical period in their lives, combining professional mentoring, transformative experiences, and post-secondary and career support to help young people build the skills, relationships, and confidence to thrive.

Today, Summer Search serves young people across five regions and is entering a new chapter of our work. Our recently adopted FY27-29 Strategic Plan puts an even greater emphasis on leadership: strengthening leadership development within our core program, testing new ways to reach more young people, and sharing our mentoring approach with adults and organizations beyond Summer Search.

As our strategy evolves, we see an opportunity for our external positioning and messaging to evolve with it.

The Opportunity

Summer Search has historically described itself as a youth development organization. While that remains an accurate description of our work, it does not fully capture where we are headed or what has always been distinctive about our approach.

Leadership has long been at the heart of Summer Search. We believe young people already have the capacity to lead, and that trusted relationships, meaningful experiences, and opportunities to exercise agency can help them recognize and strengthen that capacity.

We are increasingly moving toward describing Summer Search as a youth leadership organization and seeking a messaging and positioning partner to help us define what that shift means, articulate it clearly and credibly, and build a messaging framework that can be used consistently across the organization.

This is not intended to be a full visual rebrand. We are primarily seeking strategic messaging, positioning, and narrative support.

What We Hope to Accomplish

- Clarify Summer Search's organizational positioning and what it means for us to identify as a youth leadership organization.
- Develop a compelling and well-supported narrative for why leadership, why Summer Search, and why now.
- Clearly articulate what differentiates Summer Search's approach to developing leadership in young people vs. other youth leadership organizations.
- Connect our positioning to our 35-year history without making the evolution feel like an abrupt departure from who we have been.
- Create messaging that resonates with multiple audiences, particularly donors and funders, partners, young people and alumni, and prospective supporters.
- Establish a shared messaging framework that staff, organizational leaders, and volunteer ambassadors can confidently use in their own voices.

- Identify language we should consistently use, language we should reconsider, where terminology may need to vary by audience and include the top 3-5 hardest challenge questions we might receive and how to respond.
- Translate the positioning into practical language for our highest-priority communications.

Questions We Want This Work to Answer

What do we mean by leadership?

How does Summer Search define leadership in a way that is meaningful, accessible, and distinctive?

What makes Summer Search a youth leadership organization?

What about our model, history, outcomes, and future direction supports this positioning?

What is changing, and what isn't?

How do we communicate this evolution as a sharpening of who we are rather than simply adopting a new label?

Why does this matter now?

What is the broader case for investing in young people's leadership today?

What makes our approach different?

How do mentoring, transformative experiences, agency, relationships, and long-term support come together to develop leadership?

How should we talk about our impact?

How do we connect leadership development with the tangible educational, career, economic, and life outcomes our stakeholders already associate with Summer Search?

How does this come to life for different audiences?

What should remain consistent, and what should change when we are speaking with a donor, student, alum, school partner, corporate partner, or prospective supporter?

Proposed Scope of Work

We are open to recommendations from prospective partners on the exact process, but anticipate an engagement that includes four phases.

1. Review & Focused Discovery

Summer Search has recently completed an extensive strategic planning process that included significant input from staff, board members, and other stakeholders. We are not seeking to replicate that discovery process through this engagement.

The selected partner will review existing materials, including our FY27-29 Strategic Plan, current messaging, website, case for support, impact communications, program materials, and relevant research and stakeholder input already gathered by Summer Search.

We anticipate **<10 targeted conversations** with key organizational leaders and stakeholders to clarify questions or perspectives that cannot be answered through existing materials. We

welcome recommendations on the most efficient approach and do not anticipate a broad stakeholder interview process.

The partner should:

- Synthesize existing materials and stakeholder input to identify the strongest foundations for Summer Search's positioning.
- Assess current messaging and identify opportunities, tensions, and gaps related specifically to our evolution toward youth leadership.
- Conduct a limited number of targeted stakeholder conversations where they will materially inform the positioning and messaging.
- Where useful, conduct a light landscape review to understand how peer youth-serving and youth leadership organizations position themselves and where Summer Search has an opportunity to differentiate.

2. Positioning Strategy

Develop a recommended positioning framework that articulates:

- Who Summer Search is
- What we believe
- What we mean by youth leadership
- The role Summer Search plays in developing leadership
- What differentiates our approach
- Why our work matters now
- The relationship between our legacy and future direction

We would also value guidance on whether "youth leadership organization" is the strongest language for this positioning and how it should be introduced externally.

3. Messaging Framework

Develop a practical messaging architecture that may include:

- Core organizational narrative
- Compelling and well-supported positioning statement
- Short organizational description
- Elevator pitch
- Key messages and supporting proof points
- Definition and articulation of leadership
- "Why now" narrative and differentiation vs. other youth leadership organizations
- Audience-specific messaging
- Message hierarchy
- Recommended terminology and language guidance
- Frequently asked questions or responses to anticipated questions about the evolution and top 3-5 hardest challenge questions we might receive
- Examples of how the messaging can flex across different communications and audiences

We are less interested in polished language that only a communications professional can deliver and more interested in messaging that sounds natural when spoken by staff, board members, alumni, and supporters.

4. Activation & Implementation

Help Summer Search translate the new messaging into priority communications and develop a practical roadmap for broader adoption across the organization.

We are seeking a partner who can help us move from messaging development into implementation, establishing the tools, guidance, and internal capacity needed for Summer Search to use the new positioning consistently across the organization.

This phase may include:

- Develop a prioritized activation roadmap identifying key communications and materials to update, recommended sequencing, ownership, and timing.
- Help translate the new messaging into several priority communications, which may include:
 - Website homepage and About language
 - Case for support
 - Donor and funder communications
 - Organizational boilerplate
 - Presentation/elevator pitch language
 - Leadership talking points
 - Board and staff messaging resources
 - Social media and external announcement language, if appropriate
- Facilitate an internal rollout and/or training to help staff and organizational leaders understand and confidently use the new messaging.
- Establish clear messaging guidance and guardrails that enable staff to adapt the messaging across communications while maintaining consistency.
- Provide review, guidance, and limited implementation support as Summer Search begins applying the new messaging in February and March 2027.
- Provide recommendations for how this positioning could inform future thought leadership and executive visibility efforts.

We do not expect every Summer Search communication or asset to be rewritten as part of this engagement. Rather, we are looking for a partner who can help us establish the foundation, update several high-priority applications, and equip our team to carry the work forward consistently.

Deliverables

1. Messaging and positioning strategy
2. Core organizational narrative
3. Messaging architecture and compelling key messages
4. Polished audience-specific messaging guidance
5. Leadership definition and supporting narrative
6. Short, medium, and long organizational descriptions
7. Elevator pitch and talking points

8. Messaging dos/don'ts and terminology guidance
9. FAQ or transition messaging
10. Prioritized activation roadmap, including recommended sequencing, ownership, and timing
11. Internal rollout/training for staff and organizational leaders
12. Updated copy for a select number of priority communications
13. Limited implementation support and messaging review through March 2027
14. Recommendations for how the positioning can inform future thought leadership and executive visibility efforts
15. Final messaging toolkit that can serve as an ongoing resource for Summer Search staff and leadership

We welcome recommendations from prospective partners if you believe a different set of deliverables would better accomplish our goals.

What We're Looking for in a Partner

We are particularly interested in individuals, consultants, or agencies with experience in:

- Brand positioning and messaging strategy
- Nonprofit and/or social impact communications
- Youth-serving organizations
- Translating complex strategies into simple, human language
- Facilitating messaging development across multiple stakeholders
- Developing messaging that works for both fundraising and broader organizational communications

Experience specifically in youth leadership is welcome but not required. We are most interested in a partner who will ask strong questions, challenge our assumptions, and help us find language that is clear, differentiated, authentic, and usable.

Proposal Requirements

Please include:

- Brief introduction to you/your firm and why this project is of interest
- Your proposed approach and process
- Given the significant discovery and stakeholder engagement Summer Search has already completed, please describe how you would make efficient use of existing research and materials and where you believe additional stakeholder input is essential.
- Recommended scope and deliverables
- Proposed timeline
- Project team and who would work directly with Summer Search
- Relevant examples of similar messaging or positioning engagements
- Two to three client references
- Proposed fee and any anticipated additional expenses. *Please provide separate pricing for the core messaging and positioning engagement and for activation (November 2026 - Late January 2027) and implementation support (February - March 2027).*
- Any assumptions about Summer Search staff time or participation required

- Any recommendations or questions you believe we should consider based on this RFP

We encourage concise proposals. We are more interested in understanding how you think and work than receiving an extensive capabilities presentation.

Selection Criteria

Summer Search will consider:

- Strength of proposed approach
- Relevant messaging and positioning expertise
- Understanding of the opportunity and nuance of this evolution
- Ability to create clear, accessible, human-centered messaging
- Experience facilitating input from diverse stakeholders
- Quality and relevance of previous work
- Ability to work collaboratively with an internal communications team
- Proposed timeline and budget

Anticipated Timeline

- **RFP issued:** October 15, 2026
- **Proposals due:** November 2, 2026
- **Finalist conversations:** Week of November 9, 2026
- **Partner selected:** November 13, 2026
- **Project kickoff:** Week of November 16, 2026
- **Core messaging finalized:** Late January 2027
- **Activation and implementation support:** February-March 2027
- **Engagement complete:** March 2027

Budget

Summer Search anticipates a budget of approximately **\$30,000-\$40,000** for this engagement. We invite prospective partners to recommend an approach and scope within this range and to identify any elements they would recommend as optional or additional based on budget.

Submission

Please submit proposals to:

Christina Mann
National Director of Marketing and Development
cmanng@summersearch.org

Proposals are due November 2, 2026.