

GOVERNMENT ENTITIES AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT: AN OVERLOOKED SOURCE OF CIVIC MARKETING PROJECTS

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Abstract

Marketing students in a small town were approached to aid a special needs group to reposition their organization as their mission had evolved over the years but their public image remained the same as some 50 years ago. Student response in the promotions class was far and away more committed, purposeful, and creative than many “other” small business, entrepreneurial projects that students are assigned. The outcome was more like a highly committed MBA class. But there was something else. The participants (students) were dramatically changed as well. What they did “mattered” and it answered the desire that all of us have to “make a difference.” Outcomes assessment will be examined within the class, the university administration as well as the legislative level.

Introduction

Many times in designing a project for an introductory principles or promotions (IMC) class, faculty work with the small business administration in their local area or small firms they discover through local channels such as the Chamber of Commerce, Rotary, Lions Club, etc. Often overlooked are government entities such as Sheltered Work Shops (for the mentally handicapped and disabled). In recessionary times with aging “boomers” who have provided for special needs children inside the family unit but may not be able to do so in the future, there is a potential uptick in demand for these services. These organizations are undergoing rapidly increasing changes with fewer resources than before as well as greater expectations of the quality of the services they provide. They are not unlike a profitable enterprise but rather face some unique challenges to their survival and ability to address the needs of a more demanding consumer.

Literature Search

Experiential learning, service learning, interactive learning and civic engagement are often used interchangeably, yet there are overlaps as well as distinctions concerning the three concepts. For instance, Prins and Webster (2010) consider service learning to be “...the primary means through which students are involved in outreach and engagement, providing an opportunity for students to interact with people in local or distant communities. Service learning provides a

setting for learning outside the classroom, while adding a sense of “community context’ to students’ education and connecting coursework to the real world.” Many would argue that this definition could be used by all three concepts. However, Brabant and Braid (2009) would argue that “...civic engagement is inherently political and that definitional dilemmas have arisen from the conflation of the terms service-learning and civic engagement.”

At any rate, there is considerable evidence on a number of fronts that civic engagement is being incorporated into academic planning (Britner, 2012; Wasburn, Laskowitz-Weingart, Summers 2004). In addition the mission and purpose of TRUCEN (the Research University Civic Engagement Network) is to advance civic engagement and engaged scholarship among research universities (2012). “Most universities were founded with a civic purpose. They have a fundamental obligation to apply their skills, resources, and energy to address the most challenging issues in society.” (2012) Certainly it is appropriate for universities to leverage their resources in accomplishing this goal.

One of the goals in this paper is to examine outcomes assessment of civic engagement. Since legislators are interested in university engagement with the community and, in many states, are actively measuring the results of such interactions. Presumably, since the outcome is being measured, it is also a measure by which state funds are allocated. Should experiential learning or service based projects, that benefit the local community be considered civic engagement? If so, then how are they measured? Do the measurements capture the true contribution of faculty and students in ways that are relevant to the mission and purpose of TRUCEN?

This paper will examine a charitable project undertaken by a promotions (IMC) class and the outcomes of the civic engagement. The client was for the Sheltered Workshop Opportunities of Bryan County (SWO), an organization for the physically and mentally handicapped.

The Challenge

Students in the Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) or Promotional Strategy class were assigned the SWO as a final project. Unique challenges were:

- An extremely limited budget...creativity here would be essential.
- Repositioning of the workshop in the minds of the public
- Increasing revenue to provide more “quality of life” opportunities
- More challenging and public opportunities for the workshop employees
- Great communication of what the workshop has to offer to those who may need the

services but be unaware of how workshops operate from some 50 years ago.

The Project

The students were both privileged and fortunate to have a director of the workshop who had a marketing background. But as one student commented on in debriefing, the director "...was overwhelmed by the entire task of promoting her organization....needed an outside source to help ...execute a promotional strategy."

Students were divided into teams of four to six individuals; a draft of their project proposal was submitted with both the mission statement and the problem statement clearly defined. At this point, the director had visited the class and the class had visited the site. Sorting out and prioritizing the major goals was also a part of the teams' proposals. Up until now, the entire class had met with the director and been advised by the faculty member as a class. Teams were required to meet with the faculty member for approval to advance to the next stage. This would soon change as the teams would be in competition for the "Best Project". Each team was allowed to set their own goals. The goals and hierarchy of those goals could be and did vary somewhat for each team, but were in line with the director's stated needs. The teams knew that they were competing for the "best project" to be selected by the client and also knew how they would be assessed by the professor. It was entirely possible to receive an "A" for the project, even if the director chose a different team as "Best."

Finally, teams were required to present a PowerPoint presentation to the client, a local reporter was invited to attend as well as the university photographer and public relations person. In keeping with the university's focus on civic engagement, this represented an opportunity to share with the local community the civic contributions that students were making.

Publicity and Civic Engagement

Sometimes, we faculty are so busy doing, we do not necessarily share the outcomes with outsiders; sometimes, too, for fear of appearing to be self-serving and as an untenured faculty member the object of criticism by P & T committee members. But, we do ourselves, our students and our university's a disservice when we fail to publicize our good works to the community, the administration and the board of regents. As a result of the emphasis on civic engagement, some universities have one individual in administration that collects all "civic engagements" to report to the regents and alumni. What once might have been criticized as self-serving is now regarded as a necessary ingredient of a successful university concerned with the welfare of the students as well as town and gown relations.

The Project Outcomes

The teams delivered far beyond what was required as a project for an undergraduate promotions class. The approaches were decidedly different and the director had a very difficult time selecting the “Best Project” between two outstanding teams. One team relied heavily upon local interviews with individuals from different stakeholders to deliver highly, applicable and creative solutions. The other team did due diligence in investigating outstanding workshops from other parts of the country (even visiting one of the best out of state) and applying the best of what was needed along with a guideline of solutions to be utilized in the future on a priority basis as resources became available.

The students were heavily invested in the outcome of their projects. Perhaps a few comments taken during the debriefing will illustrate the depth and tone of their accomplishments.

- “I learned how to manage my time better. From the project especially, I learned how to research and present the financial side. I’ve always been creative but not always realistic. Also, the presentation wasn’t just a grade or competition; *it was because we actually care about SWO.*”
- “Helped someone in need; hopefully for the better.”
- “I learned from this project that I have definitely chosen the right path. The combination of my love for marketing and the altruistic feeling of helping SWO when it was in need of expertise.”

There were many other comments relating to increased confidence in their abilities, presentation skills and an overall appreciation for the opportunity to help those in need.

On a side note...

Our students photo presenting to the client was on page one of the newspaper. A superb story by a reporter who was soon leaving the local paper to begin her master’s in communication. She knew the director of the workshop and the story was a fine feature. All the photos, local coverage etc. were sent to our public relations unit on campus as well as our “civic engagement” collection administrator.

Although universities have many “official” channels, it seems that somehow publicity is best handled by the marketing folks in the marketing department. Many good stories do not see the light of day for various reasons; some political, some communication channels are just too long and complex, other reasons relate to the fact that there is simply not enough information being

conveyed in the channel to interest the local media, sometimes the message gets lost in a long and complex channel. There is nothing wrong with making a media contact yourself on behalf of your students and a good cause.

Interrelated Benefits to Stakeholders Deriving from this Project

One of the students in the promotions class was an athlete who engaged her athletic community/group in a landscaping project to beautify SWO's external building and eliminate that cold, institutional look.

The professor arranged an initial meeting with an Arts Professor and the Director of SWO to discuss the creation of a new logo. This professor, who teaches a digital photography/computer class in the arts, volunteered his fall class to develop a new logo to illustrate the new spirit and repositioning of the workshop.

Government Entities and Civic Engagement

Sometimes there is a reluctance to help government entities as some believe that they already have our tax money, so why help them? Perhaps we need to consider having our tax money well deployed to help the people most in need of help. This project was most intriguing because the director wanted a better quality of life for the participants. In addition, workshops today are not like those of 50 years ago. Participants are able to give back to the community by deploying their skills in helping others. Many enjoy and welcome the opportunity to interact with the public while providing needed services. An increase quality of life is a desired and possible outcome. Creative marketing can play a role in improving the outcome for multiple stakeholders.

Finally, there is something special that happens when in the course of doing your job (in the student's case, a group promotions project) with people who do need your expertise. Today's students, often fairly characterized as "having an entitlement attitude" can not help but be changed when helping those less fortunate. Their best character is revealed as they realize how fortunate they are and how many opportunities are available to them to realize their dreams (career, etc.) and still help others. Nearly all generations that attend college want to "make a difference." They can...right now. They do not have to wait until they make it.

Measurement Challenges Regarding Outcomes and Board of Regents Comparisons

There are at least two main issues regarding the measurement of outcomes. The first is in regard to comparisons made across the state universities in regards to what comprises “civic engagement.” The second regards subjective vs. objective measures.

Board of Regents Comparisons Across Universities

“Civic Engagement” to one university (or in another school/department across campus) is often defined quite differently. The measurement of civic engagement on some campuses is related to the number of students engaged in the activity and the number of hours they contributed. For instance, one university is known to have a day devoted to all students picking up trash in the community, another may have students involved in serving at soup kitchens. The *number of students X the number of hours* is what the outcome instrument is measuring. Both are laudable activities and make a “public splash” in the local media. But do parents really want to pay tuition for students to provide community service that in some instances has been what they have been contributing all along with their religious institutions or city/county government? However, if universities are, in part, given public funds with these types of measures, it stands to reason that they will engage where rewarded. Subjective, qualitative measures might be discounted due to the perception that a professor has a “vested interest” in such outcomes. In the case where upperclassmen contribute their knowledge, expertise, etc. to help a client in need, to fill out a form asking about hours contributed in order to merge them with trash collections is disconcerting and not reflective of the considerable skill, knowledge and expertise provided to the client by both student teams and faculty alike.

Subjective vs. Objective Measures

All faculty who have been involved with student projects know that students must develop higher order learning cognitive skills, convey complex marketing knowledge in a concise and applicable manner, and develop team skills and cooperation with others holding diverse views. We believe that this results in a far more mature, responsible, educated citizen, but where is our proof? There is a great deal of emphasis on “outcomes” both from our accrediting bodies as well as from our legislators. Do we have any instruments that would measure growth of character, maturity, and responsibility? Or are we trying to measure subjective measures that can *not* be adequately measured by our instruments? Perhaps we need to note, to paraphrase

Robert Waller, former Dean of the University of Northern Iowa that, *the really important things in life can not be counted.*

Remarkable and Unexpected Outcomes to Charitable Projects

Given enough guidance and time, the vast majority of student projects turn out quite well. We, as faculty, feel pleased (and sometimes relieved) that our students have demonstrated the ability to utilize the marketing and promotional knowledge gained in class and apply it to a real life problem. But something truly remarkable happens in “charitable projects” that makes the outcomes far beyond what we ask of our students.

- The students initiate a larger scope and commit the project to a practical, executable outcome, resulting in a far superior project
- They *care* about the client and the outcome
- The students want to make a difference *and they do*
- They initiate additional contributions
- Some classes have presented the client with their monetary donations
- Others involve campus wide or department contributions of labor and other resources.

The outcome of these projects is remarkably different than other clients. Perhaps it is because these project plans may result in an increased quality of life for those in our world who are not as fortunate as we are. At any rate, the students are quite changed by this experience. Their character, integrity, and empathy are apparent and become the drivers of a far better project than is required or expected.

Future Research

As a profession, we need to explore the outcomes of “charitable” projects vs. small business projects and the benefits to a variety of stakeholders. Many times, our marketing classes tackle a “small, limited, (no budget) project” whose client is in dire need of help. Students responded in exceedingly generous ways from outstanding projects, (way beyond the normal assignment) to donating money to the client and finding other organizations that could help aid a client in need (for example, physically landscaping the exterior by student athletes to erase that “institutional” look.)

We, as educators, talk a great deal about building character and integrity. Projects help us see what students have learned and how to build an IMC plan. But something different has happened with these students working on charitable projects. Further, it has happened

consistently with three different classes several years apart. In all instances, the projects were “charitable” something most faculty did not want to do and stayed far away. But when I challenged my class to accept the opportunity presented, the results were far beyond expectation and far superior to other projects students have engaged in. Perhaps the students’ enthusiasm and over-the-top commitment is ignited by a client who needs the help and is not judgmental regarding the source of that help. Here are some future research questions to explore/consider that might shed some light on needed answers:

- What we can do to promote the civic engagement aspect to legislators, internal administrators, etc., and other stakeholders who benefit from our students and faculty expertise, knowledge, and commitment?
- Is there a way to document the change in our students? Not necessarily via grades, but other methods of measuring the change in character, integrity, empathy and civic attitudes/behavior resulting from helping those who need their help?

References available upon request