

## EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING OF SPORT MARKETING CONCEPTS THROUGH LOCAL SPORTING EVENTS

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### ABSTRACT

Experiential learning is a current buzzword among sport marketing academicians. Student participation in the marketing functions of a community sporting event, such as Special Olympics, is an excellent opportunity for this pedagogical technique. These events offer students opportunities for career preparation, awareness of community needs and the connection of marketing theory to practice. This paper discusses the development, administration and evaluation of this type of experiential learning project and methods to incorporate it into the educational process.

### INTRODUCTION

Service learning, a type of experiential learning, has been a popular pedagogical tool in academic programs for many years and has seen rapid growth throughout the 1990's (Frontczak 1998; Petkus 2000; Saunders 1997). The obvious benefit of service learning is for students to gain real world experience while assisting local schools, organizations and communities resulting in a mutually beneficial arrangement. Marketing programs have often incorporated internships as a valuable part of the educational process (Gault, Redington & Schlager 2000; Toncar and Cudmore 2000). Class projects incorporating service learning can assist students in their career exploration and can help them choose an appropriate internship. This paper explores the service-learning component as a class project and gives steps and advice on how to use the teaching tool effectively. In particular, it focuses on having students market a community-sporting event.

Service learning offers tremendous opportunities for all involved with the process. The students gain career exploration and preparation opportunities, personal growth, awareness of community needs, and the connection of theory to practice. Faculty members are benefited by adding another pedagogical technique to their arsenal, by working with professionals in the field which helps to keep

them abreast of current trends, and by expanding their involvement in their community. The organization receiving assistance is benefited by the free labor, the expertise of the faculty, and the opportunity to increase or continue services to their clients. Lastly, the educational institution receives positive public relations from the community for its participation (Prentice & Garcia 2000).

Special Olympics is an example of an organization that is receptive to this type of assistance. The Special Olympics provides year-round sports training and athletic competition in a variety of Olympic sports for individuals with mental challenges. It gives athletes opportunities to develop physical fitness, demonstrate courage, and experience joy and friendship with other athletes and volunteers. The involvement of a student club or an individual class with this organization creates many opportunities for service learning from volunteering at local events to actually directing them. The size and scope of the event depends on the abilities of the students and the needs of the local Special Olympic Organization. Marketing concepts related to promotional strategy, advertising, retailing, sponsorship, sales, public relations, research and the development of a marketing plan can be taught through a project with the Special Olympics or other community sporting events. In addition to assisting with the many marketing functions, the planning of these events can include communication with officials, venue selection, concessions, hospitality, volunteer training, merchandising, budgeting, staffing, security, emergency action plans, event operations and award ceremonies.

Projects selected can be very large in scale such as a Special Olympic Championship or smaller events such as community fun runs. Regardless of the event, the responsibilities of students can vary from intense to limited involvement. The level of student involvement and responsibility depends on the professor/advisor and his/her goals for participating in a service-learning project. The following discussion represents the process a marketing educator could use to initiate and

supervise student experiential learning with a community-sporting event.

### EVENT PREPARATION

The professor must direct initial contacts, with Special Olympics or other community sports organizations. The educator's expertise and experience aids in creating service-learning relationships. Initial contacts should be focused on the features, advantages and benefits of allowing students to conduct service-learning projects through their organization. Specific examples such as marketing research, promotional campaigns, and sponsorship plans can be discussed to arouse interest from the organization. Contact information can be obtained for Special Olympics or other community sports programs through web sites, the phone book or the park and recreation department of the city.

Once the relationship has been established the organization and the educator can identify the area(s) in which help is needed. These organizations are usually very receptive to assistance involving the marketing of their events. Typically they are too busy running their events to worry about the marketing side of event operations.

Another area of pre-planning concerns professional liability of the faculty and students involved with a community organization. It is important that the educator(s) knows the limitations of the students and works to make sure the project is run professionally. Regardless of how organized the project is, accidents or injuries can happen. Insurance coverage for participants and workers should be discussed with the community organization.

### TIME-LINE

Table 1 is an example timeline used by a public university for a Special Olympic track and field championship held annually at the end of April (the end of Spring semester). This is set up as a class project, however, other individuals and students are involved with the operation of the event.

TABLE 1

<b>(May – July)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evaluate the current year's event.</li> <li>• Prepare evaluation report. Include positive and negative results so future events can be planned.</li> </ul>
<b>(August)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Choose possible dates with Special Olympics for next event.</li> <li>• Confirm these dates with the athletic department or</li> </ul>

	with the entity donating the venue.
<b>(September-December)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evaluate staffing needs and those students that you believe will perform well in specific positions for the event.</li> <li>• Re-confirm event date with venue and special Olympic Organization.</li> <li>• Meet with Special Olympic coaches to discover their needs, wants and concerns.</li> </ul>
<b>(January)</b>	Beginning of Class Project <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explain the event and its value to your students.</li> <li>• Pick committee chairs and fill committees.</li> <li>• Explain duties of each committee and get started.</li> </ul>
<b>(February)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Committee presentations – describing progress.</li> <li>• Discuss equipment needed and procure it.</li> <li>• Discuss and develop advertising campaign.</li> <li>• Discuss and create budget.</li> </ul>
<b>(March)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sponsorship money due.</li> <li>• Entry forms due from coaches.</li> <li>• Create event program and get it printed.</li> <li>• Discuss and plan all that is needed to accommodate sponsors.</li> <li>• Meet with coaches and Special Olympic Officials to present the event plan.</li> </ul>
<b>(April)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Practice the event with students by becoming familiar with the venue and conducting event operations.</li> <li>• Collect all needed equipment for event.</li> <li>• Train volunteers.</li> <li>• Event day (have rain day scheduled).</li> </ul>

### ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

The key to a successful service learning activity is empowerment. This is achieved by getting students involved with the planning and direction of the service project from the beginning. At the start of the semester the professor should identify those students with the maturity needed to direct the project. Other students can be put to work in other important roles but not necessarily in a supervisory position.

Proper organization of students is very important in ensuring the success of an event. The size and scope of the organizational structure depends on the number students involved. For learning purposes, the more responsibility you can give each student the more beneficial it will be. Usually, a student might be chairing one committee and serving on one or two others. There is some overlap with most of the committees so communication lines must be open between them to ensure the proper development of the project. During class meetings each chair should present what has been done that week or day to further the cause. By making these presentations part of the class, students tend to take these undertakings more seriously. A written narrative regarding the duties of committees and ideas for a successful service learning experience follows.

### **Faculty Advisor(s)**

The job of the faculty advisor is to guide the students without taking over the project. Even if this project is part of a class, the instructor needs to step back and let the students take responsibility. Only by doing it on their own can they reap the benefits of this learning process. If the professor is too involved, students will look to him/her for answers and direction. It takes a very strong individual not to give this information. The role of the professor is to act as advisor when help is needed. Some of those times include direct contact with the community organization's directors, conflict resolution, to halt unsafe practices and to assist with ideas when students are heading down a path that might not be beneficial to them or the event. The key for the advisor is to trust the students and let them reach their potential. Although the requirements of the students are to be accomplished in one semester, the involvement of the advisor lasts all year.

### **Project Coordinator(s)**

The event needs one or more students to be overall coordinator(s). This person should be the one to make sure that all of the committees are staying on track and working efficiently. An election can be one method for electing these individuals with nominations coming from the rest of the class.

### **Sponsorship/Sales Chair(s)**

The class or group can be assigned the task of procuring sponsorships for the event. Class discussions might involve what sponsors get out of their involvement with the event. In community events, sponsors seem to be most interested in being a good community member and just want their name associated with it. Sponsorship options include ads in a program, the hanging of signs and banners, product sampling, and company logos printed on the clothing of the event staff, volunteers, and or participants. Signage at the events is also critical especially if the number of people involved is large. The signage can be set up at the entrance, finish lines, stands, or anywhere they will be seen by a great deal of people.

The above options are financial; other methods can be in-kind trade. This is when sponsors give their product to be associated with the event. Food, beverages, t-shirts, printing, media coverage, ambulance service, police/security personnel, and anything else that the event needs in order to be

successful can be donated to the event in the form of a sponsorship.

### **Advertising/Promotional Chair**

This committee develops the advertising and entire promotional campaign. Creativity is very important as this group must conceive the slogan, mascot, logo, and the layout of the advertisements. Media purchasing is another duty of this group. Research is done on all media outlets to discover their reach and fees. Data is evaluated and ads are placed with the appropriate media channel so that the event receives the most beneficial advertising for the event at the best price. Typically during this process media sponsors are obtained so that no money is spent. The media partners provide free advertisement space and/or airtime in exchange for their association with the event. Special Promotions are also developed and conducted, which are used to increase volunteers and spectators at the event. These include information booths at other community events, speaking at local schools and recreation centers, and contacting prospective groups that might be interested in assisting.

### **Public Relations/Media Chair(s)**

Getting the media involved is imperative. As previously discussed, the media can get involved by sponsoring the event. The media can provide pre-event publicity and coverage during the event to highlight what your students have accomplished for the community. The media partner will be seen as a community active organization.

Students can also write feature articles and press releases highlighting the event, the organization, volunteers, and specific participants that can be printed in the newspaper or other media outlets. This publicity does not cost money and is great experience for students that want to get involved with the media. They can also set up TV and radio appearances to push the event.

### **Finance Chair(s)**

This committee creates and regulates the budget. Since this is a non-profit enterprise, the key is not to lose money. All expenses must be covered by donations or through sponsorships. If little money has been generated, this group must decide what needs to be cut so that it stays on budget. This is an excellent way to discuss the concepts and techniques of budgeting. The budget can be developed as a total group exercise and the chair's

job will be to make sure that the event stays on budget.

### **Concessions Coordinator(s)**

Feeding the participants is an important part of a successful event. Many soft drink companies can donate beverages. Local restaurants might also like to get involved. These could be labeled as sponsors and get the appropriate benefits (i.e. signage, inclusion in ads, etc.). Community service groups such as the Kiwanis are other options. They make money for services rendered throughout the year and must give it back to the community. These events are excellent ways for them to fulfill their mission by providing food for the participants and volunteers.

### **Ceremonies/Awards Coordinator(s)**

The events start with opening ceremonies. With the Special Olympics it is great to have a "torch run" into the venue. Media like to cover these ceremonies and should be invited to it. Having a community group, such as the police, run the torch to the event has been a successful way to get media involved. Police officers run the flame over from their local headquarters and present it to the event director. The flame can also be given to some competitors and they can run it around the track or the venue. This is not difficult to set up and has had great success in getting media coverage. Another idea for generating media coverage is to give a donation to the Special Olympics. The money donated comes from the money received through your sponsorship efforts.

The closing ceremony can also be a great event. Ideas include the announcement of the winning teams, MVP's, most improved, most courageous, etc. Remember the goal is to make all feel appreciated and successful. This is also a great time to thank those that made the event possible such as coaches, sponsors, and volunteers.

### **POST EVENT**

This is a very important part of the project. Personal letters need to be sent to sponsors, media, governmental organizations and any other person or group that was involved with the event. These relationships need to be developed and maintained so that future events will be even more successful.

These events tend to be annual. Each year the participants should learn from the previous year so

that certain problems can be avoided. Each committee chair needs to prepare a report detailing the successful and unsuccessful parts of the event. Surveys and interviews can also be conducted with the student service learners, volunteers, participants, families of participants, coaches, sponsors and the Special Olympics or community organization itself. This information from completed surveys needs to be processed and reported so that it will be useful in the preparation of next year's event.

### **SUMMARY**

Service learning can be a valued addition to a student's education. The student can gain self-confidence and career direction through these activities and the faculty advisor keeps in touch with current trends. Additionally, the enthusiastic student workforce enhances the community agency receiving the assistance. The keys to a successful service learning experience is teamwork on the part of the students and the advisor's ability to step back and let the learning take place in its own.

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