Table of Contents

Introduction..... 1

Inspiration..... 2

Small Group Communication..... 4

Persuasion 11

Nonprofit Organizations..... 16

Reflection 18

Works Cited..... 20

Appendix..... 21

Introduction

United Way's annual event, Flavor of SLO, is well known throughout the community of the Communication Studies majors of Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo. For the past four years, Communication Studies majors have taken this event on as their Senior Project. What makes this event so enticing for students, like myself, to plan this event? Originally created by Cal Poly students, Flavor of SLO is a local tasting event that showcases the many "flavors" of San Luis Obispo. The event encompasses all of San Luis Obispo's favorite restaurants, wineries, and breweries and the proceeds benefit the non-profit organization, United Way of San Luis Obispo County. Not only is it an enjoyable afternoon at the historical Jack House & Gardens, but the money is going to an organization that seeks to improve the education, income, and health of San Luis Obispo.

As senior year was approaching quickly, I brainstormed a variety of things to do for my Senior Project. I asked myself certain questions to narrow down my options. What do I want to accomplish out of Senior Project? What do I want to learn? What are my strengths? What will impact my future and the community long term? All of the answers to these questions directed me to Flavor of SLO. To be a hand and foot in the event planning process for Flavor of SLO would be a dream.

I immediately told other fellow classmates in my major about my idea to be on the committee and sought to see if they were willing to make a team. Once a team was formed, I contacted Chief Operating Officer of United Way SLO, Charlene Rosales, in May of 2011. We met with her and the rest of the United Way staff and discussed the possibility of us becoming the future team for Flavor of SLO 2012.

After our meeting, she told us at the end of the meeting that she would love to have us on board with next year's event.

With much deliberation over one another's strengths and passions, we divided up roles among our team. Due to my experience with other non-profit organizations and as a restaurant server, I was selected as the food vendor coordinator. I deliberated with my Senior Project advisor, Dr. Duffy, and devised my Senior Project to be a comprehensive paper that includes communication concepts that I used as a vendor coordinator. These concepts include persuasion, small group communication, and non-profit organizations.

Inspiration

I chose to do an event for my Senior Project because of my previous experience with event coordination in the non-profit area of business. My junior year of college, I interned for the local non-profit organization, Family Care Network Inc. FCNI is the number one family care service provider in the central coast. They coordinate foster care communities and provide children's behavior programs. I interned in the Community Resource Department that helps raise all of the organization's income and funds. Through my work at FCNI, I called many sponsors and organizations in the community asking if they would be willing to donate to the cause of FCNI. I promoted FCNI's mission statement through these sales calls and recruited donators. During any of the special events they had throughout the year, I would be responsible for calling food and wine vendors to come to our events and donate their time and food for the cause. Through the internship, I learned what it means to

"sell" an organization's mission statement and have that be the motivation that drives people to make donations.

Another role that has contributed to my passion for events and vendor coordination is my experience in waitressing at the Italian restaurant, Upper Crust Trattoria. In this job, I have learned the art of persuasive communication through interacting with customers. Every day, I am expected to meet a certain quota for the amount of food sales I sell. Because of this, I have learned how to best cater to my customers based on their economic and physical needs. Through constant communication with these customers, I have also learned to format my speaking skills. When reciting the specials, I try to use euphemistic language like "pan seared" and "freshly baked" to attract them to the higher priced items.

I believe my experience with FCNI and Upper Crust significantly equipped me to be a successful vendor coordinator for Flavor of SLO. The skills I learned to market a nonprofit organization and to persuade were the characteristics I needed to possess in vendor coordination.

My basic job description as a vendor coordinator was to recruit the participation of food vendors to donate their products and time to the event on May 6th, 2012. I traveled to each restaurant/vendor to discuss with the managers and owners the motivation and reason for Flavor of SLO. After committals from vendors, I was in constant communication with them from that point on. I contacted the county and city for specific guidelines and paperwork the vendors needed to fill out. I sent and delivered paperwork and guidelines to every committed vendor. In addition, I helped contact other vendors for auction item donations for the silent

auction we would be having the day of the event. I will go into further detail of my role as a vendor coordinator as I explore communication concepts that directly applied to my journey through Flavor of SLO.

Small Group Communication

The entire process of the event planning, from start to finish, incorporated small group communication. The definition of small group communication, according to Isa n. Engleberg, is the "interaction of three or more interdependent people working toward a common goal" (Engleberg 4). There were six students involved in Flavor of SLO along with two supervisors from United Way, Charlene Rosales and Jessica Blum. The interaction within our group consisted of group meetings twice a week, and individual team meetings once a week. Our team was daily communicating with one another to ensure fluidity and clarity with every step of the event planning process. Every role in the group was reliant upon one another. For example, the vendor team could not bring incentive to the vendors without having a marketing plan, provided by the marketing team. Similarly, the event would not have been possible without the support and planning with the city, county, and team from the coordination team. Our team relied and depended on one another to accomplish our common goal, to make Flavor of SLO 2012 the most successful event.

Bruce W. Tuckman describes a group's development in four different stages. The first stage is the forming stage. In this stage, the group orientates themselves with the task at hand and with one another (Engleberg 32). All six of us were Communication Studies majors and have shared the same classes throughout college. We were all acquaintances and friends but had never worked in a group

together before. This made me a little nervous with the thought of doing my senior project with good friends. I did not want any conflict or tension occurring in our senior project group to carry over into our friendship. This was a risk that I definitely considered before committing to the team. I realized that with the strong work ethic and determination of each member of the group, we could communicate and work through anything. I trusted all of the girls in the group and realized that quality is the best foundation someone can have in a group member.

Our first task of orientating ourselves with the event and each other was to meet with the staff of United Way. During the meeting, we introduced ourselves and discussed the planning process for Flavor of SLO. Once we knew our expectations as a team and as individuals, we felt comfortable moving forward as a group with the event. We divided up the roles of the event among the six of us. Courtney and Alyssa were the marketing coordinators, Allison and Lisa were the event coordinators, and Sarah and I were the vendor (beverage and food) coordinators.

As we started to get deep into the planning process, the storming stage occurred within our group. In this stage, "groups become more argumentative and emotional as they discuss important issues and ideas" (Engleberg 32). For Sarah and I, we were feeling overloaded with vendor tasks. We started recruiting vendors in February and our goal was to have all vendors committed by March 21st. The clock was ticking and the number of vendors we had to speak with about the event was continuing to multiply. I was starting to feel that I did not have enough time to get the amount of vendors the previous team had last year. I voiced out my concern to the team and we were able to discuss more of a realistic goal for the amount of food

vendors I should get. Because Lisa had less to do for event coordinating during that time, she volunteered to help email and go to restaurants with me. Similarly, Allison was in charge of getting the auction items from various vendors in the SLO community. She was having trouble coming up with vendors and ideas to market the donations of others for our event. Because Sarah and I were constantly meeting up with vendors, we came up with an idea to help Allison with her workload. If any of our vendors said no to participating in Flavor of SLO, we would ask if they would be willing to donate an auction item (i.e., gift card, case of wine) for our silent auction. We found that most vendors would do so. This new technique alleviated a lot of stress for Allison.

According to Engleberg, once the storming stage has occurred, the roles clarify and the “team style begins to materialize” (Engleberg 32). In the storming stage, we encountered unknown situations and circumstances in which we did not know how to act. In communicating these concerns to the group, we were able to help one another with these roles. Though there were constraints and resistance to some people’s roles, this stage was necessary to endure through to solidify each individual’s tasks for the team.

The third stage is the "forming" stage. This stage is when the planning process of the team really starts to flow. Roles and expectations of the team are fully understood and known and conflict is resolved and communicated. The team starts to work more together to achieve the common goal (Engleberg 32). This stage happened right after the vendors were all committed which was formally after spring break. All of us were able to breathe for a second, and more stability was

achieved. Now that our number one task was completed, Sarah and I were more available to focus on the marketing part of the vendors. We printed out all of our marketing literature and we were all working as a team to make our event known throughout the community. The planning process became more routine-like during this stage.

The last and final stage of Tuckman's group development is the performing stage. This stage is when "group members focus their energies and decisions are reached" (Engleberg 32). This stage occurred during the last couple weeks leading up to the event and during the event. I would categorize this stage as, "down to the wire" stage. More auction items needed to be made and wrapped and the "day of" schedule with the map of vendors needed to be made. All of the last minute details were coming to us and our group was meeting constantly. During the weekend of the event, we were meeting daily at one another's house going over what each minute and hour would look like the day of the event and emailing vendors to confirm and remind them of their arrival time. When Sunday, May 6th, came around we were ready to perform and bring the best wine and food event SLO has ever had.

One aspect that was addressed and central to our small group communication was the presence of norms. In the beginning of the planning process, our team addressed what our explicit team norms would be. We agreed upon meeting with United Way and its staff every Friday at 12:30 PM at their office downtown and to meet as a team every Tuesday at 2 PM in the library. Attendance was expected from every team member at all of the meetings. This attendance norm was clearly communicated throughout our team.

The procedural norm of our meetings was very consistent. Each meeting, we would alternate hearing from each team and the new updates or ideas they had regarding that role. Lisa and Allison, the event coordinators, would print out an agenda for each meeting so we would have a reference to how our meetings would run. This was a norm that was expected and followed for every meeting. During the meeting, we would discuss "action steps" for each team member to do that week. Many of my action steps included emailing and following up with specific vendors, contacting the city and the county, and retrieving auction items from various restaurants and companies.

An implicit norm is a norm that is not ever stated but assumed. It was expected as part of an implicit norm that everyone would report every new update to the team via email. Whenever a vendor coordinator had new updates or an additional vendor or if the marketing team had new updates with the downtown banner, it was assumed that it would be communicated. This caused some further conflict down the road when the norm was violated and team members were affected by it (Engleberg 35).

Conflict is a re-occurring process of small group communication. Whenever a group of three or more people commune to work towards a common goal, there is going to be differences and disagreements in the way each individual achieves that common goal. Conflict is formally defined as "the disagreement and disharmony that occurs in groups when differences are expressed regarding ideas, methods, and or members" (Engleberg 158). Conflict only occurs when differences are expressed to

the group. As a team, I believe we had considerable amount of conflict that sometimes was not always expressed or communicated fully.

Communication theorists identify one form of conflict as substantive conflict. This form of conflict is a disagreement over member's ideas or issues, not the members themselves (Engleberg 158). Our first form of substantive conflict was disagreement over this year's ticket prices for Flavor of SLO. We separated the ticket prices into two categories, student and adult. There was a lot of disagreement over the prices because of the unknown of our desired target market. Last year, there were not as many students attending the event as there were adults. Some group members wanted to change this and make a community wide event for all ages. Others thought it was more strategic to target the middle-aged and adult demographic because of their stable financial situation and tendency to attend these events. Being a vendor coordinator, I knew a lot of the businesses that would commit to the event would want a younger demographic to attend because of their need of their name be known in the large college community. After a large discussion, we came to the decision to keep the prices on the lower side to target more of the student population. We compromised as a group by raising the student ticket prices five dollars more than the previous year. We thought it was a risk worth taking due to the high status of the event.

Another form of substantive conflict we encountered was during our "soap box" for the monthly community-wide event, Good Morning SLO. Allison was in charge of writing the two-minute script for our team to present. After reading to us her drafted version of our script, there were many objections to what was said. We

had a lot of different opinions regarding how to present Flavor of SLO to Good Morning SLO. As a team, we discussed how we could edit and adjust Allison's script. No feelings or emotions were involved or hurt during this time, only adjustments and disagreements over the content, the script. Eventually, we came to a final version of the script and Good Morning SLO was a success.

Procedural conflict is another form of conflict that small groups often encounter. Procedural conflict is "the disagreement among group members about the methods or process the group should follow in its attempt to accomplish a goal" (Engleberg 159). I personally had a lot of disagreement over the procedure of our meetings. As stated earlier, we all decided to meet twice a week to update one another and vision cast for the upcoming months. I agreed to these explicit norms in the beginning because I thought it was best for our team. As my workload for vendor coordination increased, it was more difficult to commit to the meetings. I was struggling to balance time meeting all of my vendors at their various locations while trying to fit in Tuesday meetings with my team on campus. For the well being of a vendor coordinator, it was more important to meet with my vendors then to meet with my team. The majority of the team meetings were focused on marketing and event coordination, none of which concerned the vendor team. Unlike the other teams, Sarah and I had to make a point to visit the vendors at their prospective sites. This made our role more demanding and time consuming in comparison to the others. I started missing some of the meetings due to my time struggle. I thought that the team meetings should not have been mandatory to go to and that attendance at the meetings should be determined by necessity to meet with other

teammates. For Sarah and I, it was not a necessity to meet weekly, and because of this there was a procedural conflict. Sarah and I did not express this procedural conflict in the best way possible. I only expressed my procedural concerns to Allison who then voiced it to the group. I learned that this was not the best way to communicate conflict. It caused a rift in communication within our team and I take full ownership of that. I know now that conflict is only fully worked through when each member of the group involved expresses it.

The last type of conflict is called affective conflict. This type of conflict "centers around the personalities, communication styles, and emotions of group members" (Engleberg 159). Affective conflict did not occur as frequently as the previous types of conflict, but nonetheless still occurred. Throughout any of our meeting times, six females are constantly trying to compete for power and dominance in the conversation. Every member wants to get a word into the conversation. Sometimes, certain members were dominating the conversation and not allowing others to share. Some member's communication style was not conducive to the well being of the entire group. Through some dominant speakers, others felt unheard and that caused us to re-evaluate how to run the meetings. Because we had a time constraint, we divided our meetings into individual times each group member could share. This plan proved to be successful and more time efficient.

Persuasion

Persuasion was a skill I constantly used as a vendor coordinator. My main job was to persuade vendors to donate their food and time in participating in Flavor of SLO. In beginning this process, Sarah and I started brainstorming how we would

specifically approach these vendors in informing them about our upcoming event. From the response surveys last year, the majority of the vendors of whom attended had an overwhelming amount of praise and approval from the guests. Because of these appraising responses, we wanted to invite the previous year's vendors to participate again. We did not, however, want this year's event to be a sole return of last year's vendors. We brainstormed a long list of new restaurants and wineries in the SLO community that we wanted to extend an invitation. In order to form this list, I asked myself questions like: What new restaurants have opened this year? What are some restaurants that have been overlooked? In asking myself these questions, I was able to form a list of about ten to fifteen new restaurants whose presence and products we would want at the event.

Our first plan of action was to send a formal invitation/letter via mail to all of the prospective vendors. Sarah and I drafted up a letter to send to the returning vendors from last year and a separate letter to the new vendors. Each of the letters contained the same information regarding details of the event, however the introduction of the letter differed. We thought that sending a formal invitation would signify to the prospective vendors the high status and formality of the event. We wanted to make each invitation personalized and inviting for the vendor.

One of the main points of persuasion on our invitation letter was a list of benefits the vendor would receive if they chose to participate. We purposely included this list because of the rule of reciprocity. The "rule of reciprocity," according to Robert B. Cialdini, says, "we should try to repay, in kind, what another person has provided us" (Cialdini 17). Because of this rule, we are obligated to "the

future repayment of favors, gifts, invitations, and the like" (Cialdini 18). Cialdini identified this rule through the basic observance of human nature. According to Alvin Gouldner, there is no human society that does not abide by this basic rule (Cialdini 18). It is our natural tendency to give or repay someone or something from something that was given to us. In this same way, we wanted to use this rule on our vendors. The list of benefits in the letter promised with commitment: two free tickets to the event, company name on all printed materials and advertisements, acknowledgement in radio and television announcements, company recognition on United Way and Flavor of SLO website, and signage at the event. By explicitly listing the free advertising and benefits they would receive as a company, we hoped that the rule of reciprocity would play out in their committal to Flavor of SLO. Knowing this rule, Sarah and I tried to formulate a letter that would best show the vendors the overwhelming amount of benefits they would receive. By listing these in bullet points, the vendors could clearly see everything they would be receiving by participating in the event. Cialdini explains that it is the culture's norm to consider it "rude" when one is offered a gift and the other refuses to repay the favor (Cialdini 20). In the vendor invitation letter, we showed an overwhelming amount of favors the vendors would be receiving, and hoped they would respond to these favors by compliance to the event, rather than a "rude" refusal.

After we sent out all of the invitations, I followed up individually with each prospective vendor in person. I wanted to do face to face interaction with the prospective vendors because I knew they would be more likely to consider the event. I have worked in a restaurant for three years and know how a typical

manager works. A restaurant manager already has an overwhelming amount of tasks and people to call throughout the day. This means a letter from a non-profit organization is not exactly the number one on their to-do list of people to contact. By going into the restaurant and speaking to the manager face to face, they are more likely to be informed and familiar with the event. I immediately employed the reciprocity rule on the restaurant that I work for, Upper Crust Trattoria. I knew that when presented the opportunity to participate at the event, they would feel a sense of debt towards me as an employee. I knew they would comply to support my senior project and to pay back what I have given to them in my work the past three years.

I found it successful to talk to each employee personally because I was able to give him or her more information and detail than the letter. Through these interactions, Cialdini's social proof was confirmed. Social proof is one of Cialdini's principles of persuasion. Social proof says that, "we view behavior as more correct in a given situation to the degree that we see others performing it" (Cialdini 116). When faced with a decision, most people will look to others when defining the answer. As a rule, Cialdini states, "we will make fewer mistakes by acting in accord with social evidence than contrary to it" (Cialdini 116). When discussing the opportunity to participate, many vendors' first question about the event was, "Who are the other vendors coming to the event?" People wanted to know what other restaurants were doing and if they were participating. By asking this question, they were able to get a general consensus of what was the social tendency. I found out the in the beginning of my journey, when few vendors had committed, vendors were less likely to commit because of now knowing others committing. I discovered,

however, that the more vendors who committed, the more I was able to report when answering that question. This proved to work for the vendors in accordance with the social proof theory, and therefore committed on the spot. I had a specifically difficult time with the restaurant, SloCo Pasty Co. They were impossible to get a hold of, and never responded to any of my emails or voicemails. When I was finally able to set up a meeting with them at the restaurant, they asked the ever so popular question, "Who else is coming?" I quickly answered with many of our big named vendors, Upper Crust, Motav, and Tahoe Joe's. Once they heard that these vendors were participating, they immediately said yes to the event. I was completely shocked to see the social proof so quickly enforced. I had been in constant communication with them regarding specific details of the event, yet they still chose to continue considering the event, rather than immediate participation. Once I had the chance to sit down with the manager and talk to her more about who else would be at the event, she committed right on the spot. People truly want to be doing what others are doing and look to them before taking any sort of action.

Another one of Cialdini's principle of persuasion that I found successful was the principle of liking. Cialdini states that, "we most prefer to say yes to the requests of someone we know and like" (Cialdini 167). Flavor of SLO is put on by the local non-profit organization, United Way. United Way helps to improve the education, income, and health of San Luis Obispo. United Way is well known throughout the community of San Luis Obispo and because of its mission, it is well liked. When going to each vendor, I made sure I expressed that all the proceeds of the event would be going to United Way. One of United Way's mottos is that "the money stays

in San Luis Obispo." People like donating to things that go to a good cause, therefore people like United Way. Because the event was for a non-profit organization that was well liked and known throughout the community, many more vendors were likely to commit to the event.

Nonprofit Organizations

Our team worked directly with the non-profit organization of United Way. We met weekly with Chief Operating Officer, Charlene Rosales, and AmeriCorps member for United Way, Jessica Blum. Through these weekly interactions and our identification through United Way as a team, we were able to learn more about how non-profit organizations work. At one of our very first meetings at United Way, Charlene and Jessica explained to us exactly what their organization is about. By knowing exactly who United Way was, we were able to that much more communicate to the vendors and donators where their money would be going. After that first meeting, all of us knew their mission as an organization and were ready to represent them during that next six months.

According to Communications Media professional, Kathy Bonk, the first step in event planning for non-profits is to "think production" (Bonk 99). United Way wanted more than three hundred people attending this event. Because of their small staff, they needed to hire other people to represent the organization and to help plan Flavor of SLO. Our team was not hired, however we were volunteers willing to put in the hard work for our senior project. United Way explained to us all of the roles that needed to be filled and we filled these roles. By having six college women

plan the event, we were able to reach the college community that much more to increase production of the event.

The second step of the planning process is to "put out all the stops" (Bonk 100). In order to advertise a special event for a non-profit organization, one must cover all media options. Our team had a marketing team to accomplish this step. The marketing team contacted all SLO board members and presented a special presentation to advertise Flavor of SLO. As a team, we went to a monthly community-wide breakfast called, Good Morning SLO, where we presented a two-minute soapbox, to explain our event. At this event, there were community and vendor representatives from all over San Luis Obispo. We were able to give a flier to all two hundred people there and go on stage and present specific aspects of the event that pertained to the community. The marketing team also interviewed with the local radio station, Krush, which was broadcasted two weeks prior to the event. We also contacted the Communication Studies Department and had them email every Communication Studies major about our upcoming event. As a team, our goal was to make sure that every facet of the SLO community knew or knew someone that knew about Flavor of SLO.

The last step of Bonk's event planning process is to "build in time to produce a memorable event" (Bonk 100). As a team, we first met with United Way exactly a year before the actual day of the event. We met periodically during fall quarter of 2011 and then weekly starting in January of 2012. As a team and with United Way, we were all committed to put as much time as needed for the success of the event. Each week, we set goals for ourselves and for our team and worked hard to fulfill

those. We also had action items that our event coordinators drafted after each meeting, which had specific actions that each team member needed to accomplish.

Reflection

When looking back on the process our team went through to plan such a successful event, I am extremely proud and glad I did this as a senior project. I learned so many things about myself and about event planning that I will take with me in my future endeavors. It was incredibly satisfying to see so many communication studies concepts that I learned through the major applied to an outside classroom event.

One of our main goals as a team was to have over three hundred people attend Flavor of SLO. This number was easily attainable and reached during the first hour of the event. Our second goal was to have more vendors than the previous year's number. Last year had twenty-four vendors and this year only had twenty-two. Though it seemed like a failure during the time, we quickly realized that it did not affect the outcome of the event whatsoever but if anything improved it. We had the perfect combination of new and returning vendors with a great variety of food. Last year, they had more returning vendors than new ones that, according to the feedback, were not what guests wanted. It was extremely encouraging to see unknown food vendors like the Mexican restaurant, La Palapa, attend the event and have them be the most raved vendor at the event. Lastly, our overall goal was to raise more money than last year's event. Though we were a thousand dollars less than what the previous year had raised, we had more positive feedback regarding this year's event. People replied back on the survey that this year's was better

organized and had better vendors than last year's Flavor of SLO. We had more expenses this year as well that also contributed to the lower number.

I believe that two of the main reasons for our success as a team were due to the previous experiences we all had with events and our organization skills. All six of us had prior experience with non-profit organizations and event planning. I think bringing all of our experiences and prior knowledge to Flavor of SLO made the planning process a lot easier. We all knew how United Way generally worked and knew the steps of event planning. This already put us ahead of the game as a team and for the event. Lastly, I think all of our organizational skills contributed to the success of Flavor of SLO. We are all six determined and responsible individuals who are extremely hard working. Though we all differed in various ways, these specific character traits were needed for this event. We were all willing to put in as much work as each day demanded and all strived to make this event a success. Our weekly meetings as a team and our constant email communication put us all on the same page and unified us as a team.

The entire process of Flavor of SLO is something I would go through over and over again. I thoroughly enjoyed planning this event and felt accomplished once the event was over. Flavor of SLO was the perfect ending to my senior year because it summarized all of my experiences I had learned throughout college. My team and I did not just plan an event, but were part of impacting the SLO community forever.

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Appendix

I. Returning Vendor Invitation Letter

II. New Vendor Invitation Letter