

Sole4Souls/Running Warehouse 2013
An Application of Communication Principles in Non Profit Event Planning.

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Running is thought by many to be the most natural, freeing movement that the human body can do. Some run for happiness, some for health, some for community, some

for clarity, some for meditation. It is a healthy, relatively cheap exercise, hobby, and passion. All one needs is a pair of sneakers and some form of athletic style clothing. For many though, purchasing a pair of running shoes is impossible. Some that do not know the sport of running well may think that any old sneaker will do. Yes, a shoe such as a pair of chucks will protect feet from the hard ground, but it can also lead to injuries, some that cost more than having a pair of running specific shoes do in the first place.

Inspiration

Vianna, a former member of the cross country and track team for Cal Poly, and myself, decided to put our passion for running, socializing, and communicating to good use by organizing a donation event to collect used running shoes. Why? We believe that running builds confidence, health, and a sense of belonging. We researched different running shoe donation charities and decided that we would donate the shoes we collect to Soles4Souls. Soles4Souls is a charity that donates old shoes to adults and children that have fallen victim to suffering and poverty. Sole4Souls also has two other divisions, Clothes4Souls and Hope4Souls, which gives relief through clothing and other necessities, but, given our backgrounds and passions, Vianna and I decided to focus on the one branch. Wayne Elsey, the founder of Sole4Souls, came up with the idea after the tsunami of 2004 and hurricane Katrina. He started the nonprofit with the goal to “change the world one pair at a time”(sole4souls.org). To date, over 19 million pairs of shoes have been distributed in 127 countries. More than 99% of the shoes donated are in good enough condition to help those in need, with less than one percent of the shoes that are not reusable being redirected to facilities that use them for renewable energy.

Vianna and I had our idea and found an organization that was legitimate. Now all we needed was a plan to promote our event and determine how to persuade people to

believe in our cause. We are focusing on the different techniques that we have learned throughout our years as Communication Studies majors, such as building successful rapport, the rules of reciprocation and persuasion, the different communication styles, as well as a few communication theories. Vianna was interested in creating this event due to her long background in running, including competing at the collegiate level. I have a passion for the sport as well, with my background in working for a running specialty store and competing in marathons. Passion and our desire to help others experience running and how it can put people on the track to a healthy lifestyle is the driving force behind our event. Running is one of the fastest growing sports in America, and it would be amazing if everyone who wants to, has a chance to try it.

Reciprocation

Planning a donation event requires many different types of communication skills and techniques. Persuasion, promotion, and organization are all necessary when creating a meaningful and successful event.

Persuasion is a necessary and powerful communication tool that is utilized, especially when asking people to make a donation. Using persuasion as a tool for donations is different than using it for sales. In sales, the consumer will be receiving something for his or her money. In donations, there is no guarantee that the donor will receive anything of monetary value; he or she may just receive a warm, responsible feeling. For some people, it takes a little more than just a good feeling to be persuaded to make a donation. Robert Cialdini's book, *Influence: Science and Practice*, discusses different persuasion motivators, and how to use that knowledge when trying to influence someone. This book is primarily useful as a learning tool to be a better sales person, but there are also tips and tricks that work for donations as well.

One of the first techniques that Cialdini discusses is the rule of reciprocation, “A small initial favor can produce a sense of obligation to agree to a substantially larger return favor”(33). We will incorporate this into our donation event by creating a sense of debt; we give each person a free Running Warehouse sticker as soon as they enter. Many of the people that attend the event are attending because he or she has the intention of donating an old pair of shoes. We just need to create an incentive for a small monetary donation in order to help cover the cost of shipping. This will work very well because people find it to be psychologically distressing to be in a debt state of mind. Due to social norms, people will go above and beyond in order to return a favor. Guests feel compelled to donate a dollar or more in order to return the “debt” of receiving a sticker. This technique is similar to that of the Hare Krishna Society who, in order to receive donations from complete strangers, would first give their target a flower as a gift. The strangers then would feel more compelled to return the favor by making a small donation. What is very interesting about this rule of reciprocity is that it is so strong that it even cancels out whether or not a person likes the requester of the return favor.

Our donors that graciously leave their old running shoes with us have already been persuaded through our use of promotion. What the donors did not expect was the donation of some money, however, according to Cialdini, “A small initial favor can produce a sense of obligation to agree to a substantially larger return favor”; therefore, our small gift of a sticker will create the obligation of a small donation in order to ship the donors’ shoes.

Although, according to the findings of a study by Eisenberger, Cotterell, and Marvel, there are different uses of the ideologies of reciprocation. Some people are more naturally inclined to be a high creditor, meaning that they return greater help or donation

than received in order to receive additional benefits. The other ideology, according to this study, is reciprocation wariness, in which a person is more suspicious of the motives of another person giving aid or a gift. This study was done on a group of Undergraduate college students, in a general education psychology class. Due to the fact that the study was done in this setting, the demographics were skewed, but the findings are still of importance when studying the rule of reciprocation. Another find from this study is that:

Individuals with a strong creditor ideology show foresight by using the norm of reciprocity to obligate others. Such a strategy generally benefits a creditor because the majority of people accept the norm and, having had their needs met by the creditor's resources, return resources desired by the creditor. Reciprocation-wary individuals, on the other hand, view the norm of reciprocity as a trap that selfish partners use to try to take advantage of them. (Reciprocation Ideology)

Vianna and I utilized this knowledge when we were handing out our gifts. We gave out stickers, but made sure not to be too forceful while gifting our donors. If the donor refused, then we simply did not force the sticker on him or her. We did not want to make our donors feel uncomfortable. The donors were already being gracious and conscientious by donating shoes; the monetary donation was just an added benefit to the cause. Therefore, it was helpful to know the different psychological states of different people when in a perceived mindset of debt.

The donation event had testers of the different types of nutrition that is utilized in running, such as Gu's, Clif bars, and Shot Bloks. Not only did this further the sense of obligation to make a small monetary donation; it will also benefit the Running Warehouse for future sales. Some of the people that try the nutrition may very well like it, and return to the store to make a purchase. Vianna and I came up with this idea when we were dining at a restaurant. The waiter was offering a free sample of wine. Neither of us said yes because we knew we would feel obligated to purchase a glass. While eating, it

dawned on us that we could do the same with running nutrition. Not only would people have more incentive to donate a dollar, the store that we are holding the event through may also see some sales. It would be a benefit to all, because runners would have an opportunity to taste some of the different flavors before purchase, our event would be able to raise some funding to cover the cost of mailing the shoes, and the store would make a profit, thus making a strong case to make this implement this donation as part of the organization.

Rapport

Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People* is one of the most famous books that offers advice on how to make good first impressions and persuade people to a way of thinking. While the nuggets of information in this book are very solid, it will be interesting to see how these tips would handle a task of persuading people to make a donation, rather than just winning friends. Chapter six of Carnegie's book is titled, "How to Make People Like you Instantly". While this chapter is designed to help a reader in his or her personal life, it will also work when attempting to collect donations. According to Carnegie, there is one very important social law in human conduct, which is: "Always make the other person feel important"(95). This is different from flattery; it is sincere and people can tell the difference. Making people feel important is vital in collecting donations because they are making a difference. When a person makes a donation, he or she feels important, and having others recognize a job well done, or a selfless act reinforces good behavior and leads to that person to continue these types of actions in the future. William James, an American psychologist, is quoted by Carnegie stating: "The deepest principle in human nature is the craving to be appreciated"(95); the

craving to be appreciated can be fulfilled through the organizers and beneficiaries of a donation reacting in a way that lavishes praise on the donor.

According to Carnegie, the most important word to a person is his or her name, “the average person is more interested in his or her own name than in all the other names on earth put together”(73). The name is a representation of what and who a person is. The importance of a name is so true; Vianna utilizes this when she is at work (she works sales), as do I. My coworkers and I make it a point to use a customer’s name when we are working with him or her. Not only does it show a sign of respect, it also builds a rapport. It is a reminder that the whole exchange is human, and that we, at the organization, want the best for the customer. In fact, using a customer’s name is so strong of a relationship building step, that when I see customers outside of the Running Warehouse, they take the time to say hello to me, and remember my name. That small step is that powerful. So using a person’s name is important for sales, but it also translates to donations.

After a person makes a donation, it is extremely important that not only to thank the person, but we do so by name. This shows how grateful we are to this person taking the time out of his or her busy day, and also makes the person feel important and appreciated. As humans, we all crave to be appreciated. If our thank you’s seem half-hearted, then the event will not be a success, and these people may not return to make future donations.

Another interesting, yet underutilized tool in building an understanding of a client and what rapport will work best with him or her is communication style. According to Hunt and Price, there are three main communication modes; visual, auditory, and kinesthetic. These three are the ways in which people process information, and can be used when relating to a client or donor. Visual communicators rely on images to

communicate, auditory communicators rely on verbal images, and kinesthetic communicators rely on emotions and feelings. A hopeful recipient of donations can build rapport by communicating in similar terms according to each donor's seeming comfort zone.

Communication Style

The communication style of both the donor and person or organization seeking the donation is an important part of the success of an event. As mentioned, there are the three main communication modes; visual, auditory, and kinesthetic. While reaching out to potential donors, it is important to promote and persuade in a way that includes all three of these styles. An example of how to communicate with a visual communicator about an event is to send an email. Visual people communicate best through reading and seeing something. Another good tactic for visual communicators is to create some type of advertisement through either television or social media, such as Facebook. Auditory communicators prefer modes of communication such as a telephone call or listening to an advertisement on the radio. These communicators connect well with what they hear. The kinesthetic communicators have a style in which they prefer to touch or feel what they are communicating. Handing a business card or a flyer works well with this type. Vianna and I were able to reach the visual and kinesthetic communicators with our use of flyers and Facebook; however, the auditory communicators were left out. We did not have a sound specific promotion such as a radio advertisement.

Communication style is not only important for the donors, but for the members of the organization or charity as well. In an interesting article by Dr. Shirley Bednarz, there are four different communication images in which customers judge the style of sales people, or in the case of a charitable event, the solicitors. Her article states that the four

styles all have strengths and weaknesses, and are the following: I'm Sorry, The Commander, The Machine, and The Accommodator. All of these styles can either help or hinder the process of rapport, but above all, it is important to remember to listen. Listening is a vital part of communication, one that is often overlooked in the business of persuasion, customer service, and relationship building.

The ideas of Bednarz's article relate to the communication theory of accommodation. Communication Accommodation theorizes that when we talk to other people, we subconsciously change and modify our style of speech. Communicators do this in order to build rapport, be more likable, or be more persuasive. There are different levels of accommodation, and in order to make a communication situation go smoothly, it is important to accommodate to just the right degree. People are nonaccommodative when they wish to create a distance between themselves and another person or situation. On the other hand, some may be overaccommodative in certain situations, and that can be perceived poorly as well. In a study conducted on undergraduate college students by Giles and Gasiorek to determine the effects of intentionality, nonaccommodation, and overaccommodation, it was discovered that people who unintentionally were nonaccommodative or overaccommodative were perceived in a more positive light than those that intentionally did not accommodate to the right degree. For example, unintentional overaccommodation can occur in a situation in which a younger adult is talking to an older adult. Being patronizing to older adults, also known, as "elderspeak" is a misuse of accommodation, that depending on the perceived motive, is viewed as either negatively, or positively. One of the most interesting findings of the study, however, is that perceived underaccommodation is viewed much less favorably than overaccommodation. Also, the perception of others is the most important part of the

accommodation theory. How a person is being perceived is much different than how a person believes he or she is being perceived.

Since events can have a diverse group of people attending, it is important to accommodate accordingly. Young donors expect a different conversation than older donors do. Being able to accommodate to different situations makes for a smoother, more comfortable conversation. It also makes a charitable event fun, and increases the likelihood that people will donate in the future.

Targeted Audience

Social proof is another important factor in persuading people that is very useful when planning donations. “The principal of social proof operates most powerfully when we are observing the behavior of people just like us”(118). The running community is a tight knit one. If promotion reaches the right people, such as the connectors and mavens that Malcolm Gladwell discusses in his book, *The Tipping Point*. Both the connectors, people that know a lot of people, and the mavens, the people that connect people and the market place are very important parts of the economy and social world, according to Gladwell. This rings true for our donation event as well; if only people that were solely in the running community were the ones donating shoes, then the event would not be very successful. While there are many people that do consider themselves to be runners, San Luis Obispo is a small town; it is not good enough to rely on just the athletic community. We needed to be able to reach a larger span of people; this is where the connectors are very important. As we promoted the event to customers that come into the store, who are typically runners, it was also important we reach a certain amount of connectors so that we were able to attract people from different social circles. This idea and use of connectors from Gladwell relates to the principal of social proof from Cialdini because

almost everyone knows a connector. These connectors can be persuasive because people want to be like people that they know, and do things that other people are doing. If we are able to get the attention of connectors, then they will inadvertently promote our event, just through the simple act of knowing many people from different walks of life.

The Mavens are also vital to our event because they are people that promote but do so without persuading. “The one thing that a maven is not is a persuader”(Gladwell, 69). This is key to remember; the mavens although they are not persuaders, are still an important part of planning our event. They will be familiar with the Running Warehouse organization, which offers great deals, and take note that the organization is giving back to the community. Mavens like to educate others about things they deem worthwhile, and a donation is a worthwhile event. Persuasion and promotion for a donation event is different from a sales one, and therefore then we planned accordingly.

An interesting study that was conducted to discover the power of persuasion in sales with the intended targeted audience being the millennial generation hypothesized and found that college aged students armed with persuasive tactic’s used by sales people were less likely to become a consumer. This study, by Henrie and Taylor, was conducted because the millennial generation has grown up in a “media-saturated, brand conscious world”(Henrie, Taylor, 71). The study also found that the millennial generation is influenced through their “concern for the environment and social conscientiousness issues”(72). So this is all good information, but how does it relate to coordinating a successful donation event? Well before coordinating an event, it is important to have an understanding of the demographic in the area in which the event is to take place. Vianna and I are holding our event in San Luis Obispo, which has a large population of college students. Since, according to this study, many young consumers are aware of, and more

likely to have a negative attitude towards persuasion that is obvious, it is important that Vianna and I focus on the fact that our donation is a conscientious cause. Though this study focuses on sales versus donations, the concept is still the same. In order to persuade a millennial, one must be sincere, or at least appear to be, and really focus on why the millennial would benefit from making a purchase or donation. An example of a company that has capitalized on the success of persuading the millennial generation is Tom's Shoes. These shoes are everywhere, and with good reason. The founder of the company has discovered that the millennial generation is more conscientious of the world, and thus as a persuasive technique, donates one pair of shoes to a person in need with each purchase of a Tom's shoe. This organization not only serves the world, in the millennial's mind, it also manages to be a successful business.

In our attempts to persuade the millennial generation, Vianna and I focused on the benefits of the donation to those in need. For this group of people, to be socially active is highly regarded and applauded. Our persuasive tactic was thus more focused on the intangible reward, versus the tangible.

Our targeted audience for this donation started with the running community. It branched out to include a much wider range of people, because that is what makes a donation successful, however, it was very important to reach the people that identify as runners. Jennifer Escalas, author of *Self-Identity and Consumer Behavior* states that, "people consume in ways that are consistent with their sense of self"(Escalas 25). Research supports that statement, and Vianna and I thought that since people consume in ways that reinforce their sense of self, then people would donate in ways that reinforce their sense of self. Runners that are truly passionate about their sport are constantly talking about it, promoting it, and trying to recruit more people to it. Vianna and I

consider ourselves to be passionate about the sport, and we definitely fall into this stereotype. People seek out things that reinforce their sense of self, and donations are no different. For example, there are so many different races that are held for different causes, such as Leukemia and Lymphoma Society, or Breast Cancer. So many people choose a big race based on the charity and their personal struggles or stories that relate to it. I ran the Nike Woman's Marathon for Leukemia and Lymphoma, and there were so many people there that were running the race for a loved one or a personal story that related directly to the cause.

Donations, Gifts, and Social Behavior

The motivation behind the need to be generous is one that Vianna and I had to tap into and utilize in our event. According to Sherry in his paper, *Gift Giving in Anthropological Perspective*, "the giving of gifts as a rhetorical gesture in social communication...gift giving, then, is properly a vehicle of social obligation and political maneuver"(Sherry 157). When viewed in this light, gift giving, or in the case of our event, donations, is a gesture that is meant to be more than just altruistic. There are four different functions to gift giving, according to Belk's article *Effects of Gift-Giving Involvement on Gift Selection Strategies*, which are, communication, social exchange, economic exchange, and socialization. The social aspect of motivation is one that played a major part in our event. The running community is a very tight knit one, and the "giving of gifts can be used to shape and reflect social integration"(Sherry 158). This relates to the idea of the connectors and mavens that Gladwell discussed. Humans are social by nature, and donations are a modern way to keep social ties strong.

There is a range of gift giving, with one end being altruistic, where the donor is focused on the pleasure of the recipient, and on the other there is agnostic, where the donor is more concerned with his or her satisfaction. It is interesting to take a look at what may be the motivation for a donor to give to a corporation or charity. Sherry states that his type of donation is one that is harder to understand and, “much of the gift giving that involves the individual donors and corporate recipients is charitable in nature”(Sherry 161). Gift giving and the different motivations behind it relate to the communication theory of attribution. The attribution theory analyzes the motivation of an average person and how he or she constructs the meaning of an event based on his or her understanding of his or her world. The two basic types of attribution are internal and external. Internal is dispositional, while external is situational. Based on the findings that relate to donations in situations where an individual is the donor and the recipient is a corporation or charity, it is assumed that the individual is making a donation based on altruistic motivation. The individual is not being forced to make a donation, and he or she is not expecting a reward. If the corporation were the one to make a donation to an individual, it is usually seen as agnostic. This is because many assume that the corporation has some kind of gain to make from this action. The corporation is thus assigned an internal attribution that is not very flattering. In the previous situation, the individual donor is given a positive internal attribution due to the external situation.

Our event is one in which the individual is making a donation to a corporation. While Vianna and I do have some small incentives to make a donation, we are making positive internal attribution assumptions about our donors. We assume that our donors are making their donations based on altruistic reasons, not agnostic.

Outcome

Overall the donation event was a success. Vianna and I were able to collect 52 pairs of shoes and 30 dollars to help with shipping. We believe that our success was largely due to our advertisement via Facebook and use of flyers. With Facebook we were able to target many people within the Cal Poly community, and we made sure to appeal to the sense of giving back to society, similar to the promotional tactics used by Tom's shoes. We also made sure to promote the event within the store to customers.

One of the things that we would have liked to improve upon was our collection of monetary donation to help cover the cost of shipping. We could have emphasized this aspect of our donation more. We also noticed that our tactic of promotion through social media was more effective, since many of our donations collected were from people that were attending the event via Facebook.

A major success however, is the fact that the manager for Running Warehouse is seriously considering setting up a permanent program that will offer customers ten percent off a new pair of running shoes when they bring in their old, still usable running shoes to donate.

Reflection

Creating and processing a donation event from scratch was difficult yet very fulfilling. The entire process really taught me that having a passion for what I do will be what makes having a career a profound and meaningful life necessity. If Vianna and I were not passionate for the cause that we were supporting, then this event would have been extremely difficult. Now I have the reinforced knowledge that passion makes any career enjoyable, I also learned that I am happiest when I am making a difference in the world, no matter how seemingly insignificant the difference may seem.

I believe that the main reason for our success was our passion for what we were doing in combination with application of communication theories and persuasion. The reason our Facebook advertisement was so successful was due to our application of what we knew about that target audience and how it reacts to different persuasive techniques. I also believe that the ability that Vianna I had to work as a team contributed to our success. We never succumbed to groupthink, although there was just the two of us planning the event. We were able to recall certain tactics from our interpersonal communication class and knew that we needed to treat each other with respect, but also not be constantly agreeing with ideas that we did not necessarily agree on.

I am also proud that I was able to convince Running Warehouse to entertain and attempt to implement the discount for customers that donate shoes. This would mean that Vianna and I were able to make a difference not only as a one-time thing, but also for years to come. This also would build the relationship between the company and the community. My only other hope for the organization is that they create a board to help host more events throughout the year in order to cater to the community even more, while also promoting their business, but I digress. This event was a step in the right direction, and hopefully the shoes that we collected will make an impact on people that we never met and never will. Making people that do not have much happy just through the simple act of receiving a pair of shoes is the real reason that Vianna and I created this event. We wanted to collect shoes for Soles4Souls to make a difference, and we accomplished it.

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Appendix

I. Donation Flyer