

Why Don't You Use the Parks System?

Engaging Non-Users

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In the past couple of years, the health benefits of parks and recreation have begun coming to light as agencies across the country have been faced with rising obesity rates. Parks and recreation provision has evolved from playgrounds, trails, open space, and community centers into an integrated network of features and amenities designed to encourage people to interact with one another while engaging in physical activities. Amenities such as community gardens and farmers markets provide access to healthy, locally grown food, and trails and other connections provide places for walking, bicycling, etc. The parks and recreation system is poised to play a significant role in health and wellness.

However, these resources are only beneficial if people use them. We at GreenPlay have completed over 300 parks and recreation master planning and related projects, and a key component of each of them is the question of how to engage non-users. People have a wide variety of reasons for not utilizing parks and recreation facilities and amenities. Through our planning projects, it appears that common reasons for non-utilization include lack of awareness, lack of access, lack of financial resources (i.e., the perception that the programs cost too much), and identifying non-sanctioned activities. Luckily, these factors are relatively easy to address.

1. Lack of awareness

People can't use parks and recreation facilities that they don't know about. For example, in 2006, GreenPlay conducted an assessment of the City and County of Denver's 29 indoor recreation centers. Denver is famous for its extensive parks and recreation system, and parks such as Washington Park and City Park serve as popular community gathering spaces; however, the survey part of the project found that about 45% of City residents didn't use indoor recreation facilities. Of the population that indicated non-use of these facilities, 49% indicated that they were not aware of them. Upon learning this, Denver immediately initiated a widespread marketing campaign and new brochure, and participation at all centers increased.



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For agencies facing similar issues, public input regarding the best ways to reach residents should be sought in a variety of ways. While recreation schedules have sometimes been sent with utility bills, many residents now choose to pay their bills online, and paper bills may be

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sent straight to the shredder. In communities with large populations of young people, it may be best to reach them through smart phone apps, email, and social media. This (growing) age bracket typically goes digital for their news and information. Advertising on popular sites such as local news sites, sponsoring posts on Facebook, or starting a Department YouTube page with videos of local events are all ways to engage a more digital sector of the population. All agencies should also conduct a statistically-valid survey of residents at least once every five years. This method reaches a random sample of the population, which should include non-users. GreenPlay does not conduct these types of surveys in-house, but there are a few nationally recognized firms we'd recommend with whom we work on a regular basis. We include statistically-valid surveys as a proven management tool in most of our projects.

2. Lack of access

People can't use parks and recreation facilities that they can't get to. GreenPlay uses the Composite Values Method (CVM) for Level of Service Analysis (our version is called GRASP®) on most of our master plans to analyze this issue. This tool allows us to inventory and evaluate not only the number of components (facilities, parks, parcels, etc.) that you manage, but also location (to evaluate which sections of your service area may not easily be able to reach parks and recreation facilities), along with the functionality of those components. Access typically tends to be more of an issue in outlying areas, but there is also a significant discrepancy among disadvantaged population groups in more developed settings, especially if there are barriers such as highways or rivers in the way. In a recent report by the National Recreation and Parks Association entitled "Parks & Recreation in Underserved Areas: A Public Health Perspective," it is noted that, "Disparities in distribution and park access exist across communities that are specifically characterized by low-income populations and some racial/ethnic minority populations."

Access to parks and recreation facilities and amenities is a critical component in encouraging physical activity. Sections of the population that have limited access to these facilities are less likely to engage in recommended amounts of physical activity. A recent Centers for Disease Control report on public obesity states, "Many communities are built in ways that make it difficult or unsafe to be physically active. For some families, getting to parks and

recreation centers may be difficult, and public transportation may not be available." To address this problem, it is critical for an agency to know where the gaps in access may be. By knowing which segments of the population aren't able to access recreation amenities, your agency can begin devising a plan to help improve access for all segments of the population.

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3. Lack of financial resources

For many people, a reason that they give for not using public parks and recreation amenities is that they, “cost too much.” However, many parks and recreation amenities, such as parks and trails, are free. Other amenities, such as indoor recreation and swimming, are typically more affordable than private providers. To determine if your agency’s programs and services are fairly and equitably priced, conducting a Cost Recovery Analysis is a good place to start. This tool help agencies determine appropriate cost recovery and avoid setting arbitrary prices, and they evaluate several factors (beyond simple market or cost) that can be taken into consideration when determining fees.

For some people, any amount of money will be perceived as too much, and there really isn’t a good way to engage this sector. For other segments of the population, such as low-income and disadvantaged populations, lack of funds is a legitimate barrier to participation. To engage these residents, creativity comes into play. An agency needs to find a way to provide access without sacrificing revenue. The City and County of Denver Parks and Recreation Department recently launched its, “My Denver Card” program. This program gives all residents of the city who are enrolled in middle school and high school a card that allows them free access to all parks and recreation facilities in the city and doubles as a library card.

4. Embracing and Managing Non-Sanctioned Activities

As we evaluate trends and non-users, another valuable assessment is to look at what residents in your community are doing that is currently considered “non-sanctioned.” We are not talking about crimes or truly deviant behaviors, but a lot of popular, trendy activities start from small sub-groups and grow until we finally recognize and embrace them, and manage them appropriately. One example is “skateboarding,” which was originally considered a nuisance activity. Now, the national average for skateboarding participation is 13%, and as a popular ad touts, “if your town doesn’t have a skatepark, it is one.” Some current typically “non-sanctioned” activities your agency may need to evaluate include parkour, slacklining, off leash dogs, geo-caching, illegal community gardens, fitness classes being taught by individual providers in your parks, and others. For more information on any of these activities, do a web search, or simply ask your public. By addressing and appropriately managing these activities, we can increase participation in a positive way, and let the citizens know that we get what they are into.

While it isn’t feasible or necessary to engage 100% of the population, many parks and recreation agencies have potential untapped customers in their service area. By seeking these people out and engaging them in a manner that works for them, your agency can successfully convert them from non-users into users – you can also encourage them to tell a friend or two.