



Make a plan to enhance community awareness and participation

by John Rainey

One thing that we frequently find during our community assessments and planning projects is a general lack of awareness of programs and/or facilities offered in the community. For instance, a scientifically-valid random mail survey in Maryland recently showed that 42% of respondents were uninformed about parks and recreational opportunities. Results like this often lead us to recommend enhancement of marketing and communication efforts to reach the diverse groups of resident “customers” in order to elevate overall public awareness and increase participation.

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*Vision 2030 Strategic Plan
Montgomery County Recreation Dept.
Montgomery County, Maryland*

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Develop a Marketing Plan

Parks and Recreation Departments need to evaluate how they are communicating with their constituencies and develop an effective marketing plan that meets the needs of a diverse population.

There are a variety of ways that an agency might approach its marketing plan. A good plan will include the following:

Situation Analysis: a thorough review of your agency noting its assets, strengths, and weaknesses.

Customer Analysis: a close look at your resident base. A good consumer analysis will include geographic, demographic, psychographic, and behavioral segmentations.

Competitive Analysis: a determination of the competition and/or other providers of similar services (private and public).

Market Analysis: a review of the dynamic forces that affect your product and service environment including legal, economic, and social conditions and the identification of opportunities, threats, and barriers.

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And an evaluation of the “4 P’s” of Marketing:

- **Products** – these are your parks and recreational offerings and how they meet your target market’s needs and desires. Consider utilization, condition, budget, etc.
- **Price** – are your service offerings competitively priced, and do they cover your costs? Are there alternatives for low-income customers, and are they aware of these alternatives?
- **Place** – are your parks and services where they need to be?
- **Promotion** – how do you communicate with your target audiences?

If your community has an up-to-date Master Plan in place, you may have a lot of this data already identified. Otherwise, you may need to conduct some additional market research. Other factors to consider are the economic environment, social environment, and political environment.

Develop Goals and Objectives

Once you have a good idea of your market conditions, it is time to incorporate that information into realistic goals and objectives. You will need to account for any constraining variables such as the agency budget, mission, and existing resources so that your plan stays within the realm of possibility. Your goals and objectives should be simple, measurable, direct statements such as:

- Increase participation at XYZ recreation center
- Increase teen participation in after-school activities
- Reduce erosion on ABC Trail

Develop a Communications Plan

A communications plan can outline the strategies and methods that will be used to involve and inform the public about Parks and Recreation programs.

A key element of this plan is to identify and prioritize the media mix needed to accomplish your goals and objectives. A good plan will use of a variety of media tools, with a growing emphasis on web-based electronic communications. The challenge is to find the right mix of marketing strategies, as no one method is effective for all.

One major trend in marketing today is to transition communications from printed to electronic media. Although printed catalogs and flyers still serve a valuable role in the overall media mix, expanded use of digital catalogs, e-newsletters, websites, cable TV (local access), text messaging, social media, and smart phone applications are becoming more prevalent.

Website

Your website is one of the most important tools for distributing public information about programs, projects and events. If your website is not up to contemporary standards, your first priority should be to bring it up to date. An unattractive or poorly built site will do more harm to your program than to help it.

There are currently over 600 million websites in the world today. Most of your customers engage with the internet on a frequent basis and they know what a good experience is like. There are five general elements that make a website successful. Your site:

- Must be visually appealing, polished and professional
- Must have up-to-date, relevant content
- Must have structure and functionality (and be compatible with all browsers)
- Must be easy to use and navigate
- Must be Search Engine Optimized (SEO)

Also, your website should be a living document – updated regularly and optimized for mobile platforms.

Social Media by the numbers:

Facebook has **1.28 billion** active monthly users. **Google+** has grown rapidly to **540 million** regular users. There are **255 million Twitter accounts**, resulting in over 5 million tweets/day. **YouTube** has over **1 billion users** worldwide, with 200 million from the US. Instagram (200 million) and Pinterest (70 million) are rapidly gaining in popularity, and LinkedIn has 187 million business professionals listed. All of these networks are on the ascendancy, and it only makes sense for parks and recreation agencies to try to leverage these trends to engage these important audiences.

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Netnography (from “Inter[net]” and “ethnography”) is a method that analyses the free behavior of individuals on the internet utilizing online marketing research techniques to provide useful insights. As a method, netnography can be faster, simpler, and less expensive than face to face ethnography, and more naturalistic and unobtrusive than focus groups or interviews. Other online tools can also help identify and engage community members. This can also enhance sociological and public administration usage relative to “public deliberation” or democratic “e-governance.”

MindMixer is one online community engagement tool rapidly gaining prominence in community governance and planning, designed to help community staff and leaders to engage their constituents and garner ideas. MindMixer allows engaged users to 1) post a challenge and let the community help find solutions, 2) gather valuable feedback through utilizing polls and surveys to quickly gauge community interest and sentiment, and 3) measure the impact of various ideas.

GreenPlay works to build relationships. We design strategies that reach out to your most important markets, including those in the political, internal, and public arenas. Whether you need approval, increased participation, better staff involvement, or just a higher level of recognition in the public eye, we can create and implement all aspects of a public process program that will help you accomplish your goals. Our selected services include:

- ✓ Community Outreach Programs
- ✓ Surveying and Information Management
- ✓ Outreach for specialized markets (i.e.; seniors, youth, ethnically diverse, etc.)
- ✓ Marketing Strategies
- ✓ Partnership Facilitation
- ✓ Public Relations Programs
- ✓ MindMixer Virtual Town Hall

References:

Active Network; California Park & Recreation Society (CPRS); Dave Chaffey (Smartinsight.com); Digital Insights; Flick, U. (2014) An Introduction to Qualitative Research; Hartz-Karp, J. and Sullivan, B. (2014) “The Unfulfilled Promise of Online Deliberation,” Journal of Public Deliberation; Kansas City Parks & Recreation; Kozinets, R.V.. (2010), “Netnography: The Marketer’s Secret Weapon”; Manosevitch, I. (2014) “The Design of Online Deliberation: Implications for Practice, Theory and Democratic Citizenship; Marotzki, W., Holze, J., and Verstandig, D. (2014) “Analyzing Virtual Data”, in U. Flick (ed.); MindMixer.com; Morgan County, Maryland Recreation Dept.; NRPA; Oceanside (CA) P&R; Our Social Times; Pew Research Internet Project; Project for Public Spaces; City of Scottsdale; Seattle Parks & Recreation.

A complete review of Social Media is more than we can cover in this article, but it is definitely the latest trend in parks and recreation marketing. Here are five online trends that will help build awareness and drive participation:

1. Daily Deal coupon for Activities and Memberships
2. Online Recreation Guides
3. Online Reputation management
4. Foursquare for Recreation Facilities
5. Pinterest for Recreation Organizations

For an additional, more detailed overview of social media for Parks and Recreation Departments, read the [Issue Brief](#) from the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA).

Community Outreach and Public Relations

GreenPlay understands that getting things accomplished in the public arena requires involvement and “buy-in” from your community. We also know that conveying positive and valid information to your stakeholders is one of the most important parts of running an agency. We can help to engage your stakeholders, allowing them to feel involved in the process.

GreenPlay utilizes a variety of **Online Qualitative Research and Engagement Methods** that can be used for community planning for parks and recreation to “add additional input and data to analysis and foster engagement and ‘buy-in.’”



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