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Marketing Strategies to Increase Participant Rates

Roxanna Leon Ceja

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Abstract

Literacy levels are too low in Monterey County. Collaboration with the Central Coast YMCA and CHISPA Housing, the goal is to help the disadvantaged kids in grades kinder to 6th in an after-school program. The Central Coast YMCA has a mission to strengthen communities through programs that develop youth and support healthy living. CHISPA housing strengthens low-income families, by providing affordable housing. Contributing factors to the low literacy levels in Monterey County are, language barriers within families, lack of parent engagement and poverty. These can lead to higher rates of school dropouts, unemployment and increased incarceration rates. The project implemented is a marketing plan to increase participants and level of engagement. The strategies consist of, door to door soliciting and placing posters around the community. At the end the intern was able to determine which strategy worked best, to use in the upcoming school years.

Keywords: Poor education outcomes, develop youth, social responsibility, reading programs, after-school program

Agency and communities served

The agency served will be the Central Coast YMCA. Their mission is to embrace the values of caring, honesty, respect, and responsibility with a mission to strengthen community through programs that develop youth, support healthy living and foster social responsibility (Central Coast YMCA, 2019). Programs offered through the Central Coast YMCA include sports and summer camps, after school homework assistance, diabetes wellness groups, and workout classes. The current internship site is at the CHISPA after school program, which is located at the Soledad Townhomes. The townhomes were built in 1991 and there are 33 apartments with a variety of 2, 3, and 4-bedroom units (CHISPA housing, 2014). This CHISPA site requires at least one member of the household to be employed as a farmworker and is for low-income families. Families pay 30% of their total income for rent, as stated per CHISPA housing guidelines. CHISPA partners with the Central Coast YMCA to help the socioeconomically disadvantaged kids grades K to 6th with after-school homework assistance. The program allows kids to have a safe place to learn and do activities where they practice social skills. CHISPA offers programs with activities that are targeted for the specific needs of the residents and may include, computer classes, health screenings, after-school programs, parenting programs, and adult literacy education. These activities empower residents to take an interest in their neighborhood, advocate for themselves and improve the lives of their families (Central Coast YMCA, 2019).

Problem description

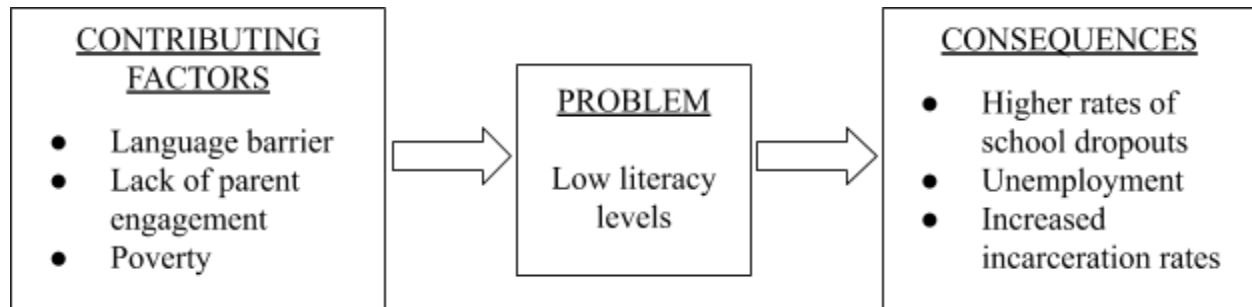
Literacy levels in Monterey County are too low. Per the Panetta Institute research, they found that “Twenty-eight percent of adults in Monterey County lack basic literacy skills...” (“Monterey County Reads – Volunteers Helping Area Children”, 2019). Making it an estimate of 80,000 to 90,000 adults in Monterey County. Per the U.S. Census Bureau, the population for Monterey County in 2018 was at 435,594, impacting a significant number of the county’s population. In California, there are a total of 374 school districts that will receive state assistance or county assistance to improve their school performance in several areas. Soledad school district will be one of the 374 school districts and the YMCA believes by helping the CHISPA after-school program, they will help the process by collaborating together and helping the populations who are at risk of having low literacy levels. At the Soledad Townhomes, the goal is to work with socioeconomically disadvantaged kids grades K to 6th. Contributing factors to the low literacy levels are language barriers within families, Lack of parent engagement and poverty.

Language barriers within families can affect a child’s literacy levels highly. Not being able to engage in reading, can add frustration to both parents and children. This can easily have them give up reading completely. In Monterey County, 55.1% of households are made up of another language besides English (U.S Census Bureau, 2018), making it difficult for parents to engage. Lack of parent engagement contributes to children being at risk of also having low reading levels. A report from 2019 showed, seventy-two percent of children are at risk of having low reading levels if their parents lack literacy skills (Proliteracy, 2019). Poverty can also be a contributing factor to low literacy levels. According to a summary on kidsdata.org, “children who face economic hardship when they are young, or who experience deep and prolonged

poverty, are at greatest risk for poor outcomes... the effects of poverty and the stress associated with it can be lasting, contributing to increased risk of dropping out of school, poor adult health, and poor employment outcomes..." (kidsdata.org, 2015-2019).

Consequences may be children dropping out of school at a young age, research shows that children who cannot read by the 4th-grade are among the first to drop out of school. Compared to children from homes with high literacy skills have greater success in school and at work (Monterey County Weekly, 2007). Monterey County has a dropout rate of 6.8% compared to 9.7% in California ("2017 Monterey County Education Report", 2017). Research from the Literacy Foundation finds, If children are unable to meet basic literacy skills, they will have trouble finding employment in the future. By lacking skills in reading and writing, it will make children lack the necessary skills needed for today's market requirements ("Causes of illiteracy: Literacy Foundation", n.d.).

Due to literacy levels being too low in Monterey County, the CHISPA after-school program along with the Central Coast YMCA will slowly engage participants in learning activities that will improve their social skills and be able to communicate well with others. The project implemented is a marketing plan to increase participants and level of engagement. The after-school program at the CHISPA sites is primarily focused to assist with homework and do activities that will provide the participants time to engage with others. When children go into the program with no homework to do, reading will be highly encouraged. Reading is the target goal, in the end, once there are more participants to engage in activities.



Scope of Work

Table included in Appendix A

Capstone project description and justification

The purpose of increasing participation rates is to be able to improve literacy skills. As mentioned earlier in my report, Monterey County has a dropout rate of 6.8% which is too close to the drop out rate of California of 9.7% ("2017 Monterey County Education Report", 2017). Research shows that children who cannot read by the 4th-grade are among the first to drop out of school. When compared to children from homes with higher literacy skills they have greater success in school and at work (Monterey County Weekly, 2007). If children do not read by 4th grade a consequence can be children dropping out of school at a young age.

An evidence-based program that can be used is the Start Making a Reader Today (SMART) program that was developed in 1992 in Oregon. The program recruits community volunteers that take a 1 – 2 hour training on four reading strategies, the strategies are on how to read to a student, how to read along with a student, how to have a student re-read a passage the tutor reads first and asks students about the reading. “Teachers identify students at-risk of reading failure to participate in the program. These students attend 30-minute sessions twice a

week during school hours and can take home two books per month to build a home library” (Baker, Scott, Gersten, & Keating, 2000). The research showed positive impacts on the participant’s reading skills over a two-year follow-up.

A similar program within Monterey County is The Monterey County Reads program. The program has been reading to Monterey County students in grades first to third grade as of 1997. Believing that helping children while they’re young can prevent future challenges. “This program especially addresses the needs of the lower socio-economic level of Monterey County’s population with a focus on Latino, Spanish-speaking and other ethnic minorities” (Monterey County Reads, 2019). The CHISPA after-school program will follow the SMART and Monterey County Reads model of reading one on one to students at least 15 – 30 minutes once per week.

Currently there is no reading program in place at the after-school program, students do their homework or participate in art crafts or outdoor activities. In order to engage more participants currently the YMCA passes out flyers a week prior to the program starting up for the school year and summertime as well. The marketing strategies to increase participation rates will include knocking door to door and creating poster boards to place around the community. Going door to door will allow the intern to provide individual soliciting to families and use evidence based strategies that have worked for supporting family engagement. As mentioned on expanding learning, there are six strategies on improving family engagement and two of them that staff can use when providing individual soliciting are, communicate and build trusting relationships. This means, “frequent and positive communication with family members which is critical to effective family engagement. and promote effective staff-family interactions, which

means to have staff that “reflect the demographics of the families served and who are trained in respect for cultural differences, including an examination of their own biases” (Little, 2011).

The second marketing strategy performed by the intern will be to assure there are poster boards around the community to remind families of the program’s dates and times. There will be a poster created and revised by the YMCA mentor to assure it is simple, informative and in a way that it can be easily read from a far. The poster board will be in areas such as, near the mailboxes, play ground and parking areas to ensure it will be visible by everyone.

Also, part of the expanding learning six strategies, staff need to “make sure the signage at the center is welcoming and accessible in the languages spoken by the families served” (Little, 2011). In this case the poster boards will have information in both English and Spanish.

The involved participants will be the students grades K to 6th. They will be recruited by encouraging the current participants to bring a friend and have a rewards program for each participant with a new referral. The role of the current participants will be to spread awareness of the program and their positive feedback, to encourage others to participate. There will be incentives for the participants in order for others to encourage their peers to complete homework once they arrive or participate in reading activities. The main resource will be the YMCA after-school program director and mentor by purchasing materials and incentives for the participants.

The current sheet used for weekly recording of students will be used to measure the expected outcomes. The information should be able to identify if there has been an increase in participants since the strategies were used. The intern will be able to determine if there was an

increase by sharing experience at the Chispa after-school program and the verbal feedback obtained from students.

Project activities

To start there will be a review of the past months participant rates. Intern will keep track in order to be able to compare rates after knocking door to door and creating poster boards to place around the community. The goal for the project is to increase the number of participants. By having more participants there will be more kids to engage in learning activities and be able to improve literacy levels. To do this they will start an incentive program to encourage current participants to refer friends to the program. Tracking will start from September 2019 to May 2020 and see if there is an increase in participants. The planning of activities will start taking place as soon as possible concluding in December 2019. By December 2019, there will be a poster board created at the CHISPA site. In November 2019, there will be a collection of reading books to have available for children, making sure all books needed are in hand by December 2019. In December 2019, the intern will also gather incentives for children having everything ready by January 2020 to start implementing the plan.

Findings/results

As a result of the project, the goal was achieved but not as great as expected. First, knocking door to door was better than passing out flyers. Being able to interact with families, the intern was able to build a relationship with the community. The door to door individual soliciting was completed during the first week and a couple weeks after the program started versus a week prior as how the YMCA has been doing it in the past. This strategy worked because it kept a trusting relationship with the parents and was a great reminder to the community of the program by doing individual soliciting weeks after the program had started.

The second strategy of creating poster boards to place around the community was also effective. The boards were created in Spanish and English and were a great reminder to students and parents. The families in the CHISPA community were farmworkers and many of them were not home for individual soliciting therefore, the boards were a great strategy for them.

The data collected to record the participant rates before the strategies were the weekly recording sheets of students. The same sheets were analyzed to see the outcome of the marketing strategies and verbal confirmations from families that the poster board and door to door soliciting worked.

Conclusion and recommendations for the agency based on results

Based on the results, the YMCA should continue to provide poster boards to place around the Chispa community. Staff should go door to door and do individual soliciting in order to build relationships with the community. Based on results going door to door the week the

program starts and a couple weeks after, works for the community. Families tend to forget about the program when flyers are left outside the house a week prior. I would recommend flyers be passed out week of and halfway through the program's school year, just to be able to communicate with families and inform them the program runs all academic school year and during breaks as well.

Personal reflection/final thoughts

I personally learned that it is difficult to engage older kids in reading because they are older and don't like to do things that seem boring. Also, it is difficult to engage younger kids as well because they are simply shy or scared of being made fun of. I learned how to approach the older and younger kids at the same time. I learned to do the things I asked of them first for example, if I wanted them to read out loud, I did it first. Then had them read to each other and had the older kids teach the younger ones how to pronounce words. I learned to get older kids to participate, it was a good idea to ask them for help with the younger ones.

A strength I gained from my project was gaining a relationship with the community. On various occasions I had parents come over and hang out with their kids at the after-school program. I spoke with mothers in the community who shared that their child was doing better since they started attending the after-school program. I also learned how to communicate with them and understand their concerns. I learned to be patient and that when working with children, it is okay to change plans but have minimal options instead of letting them decide what they want to do.

I was limited on time with my agency, as we're going through a pandemic right now, I was not able to complete my third strategy and was not able to engage no more than 8 kids in the after-school program. Overall, the current shelter in place has been going well with me and my family. I have adjusted well and have been able to have the support of my parents to allow me time to complete my schoolwork. I have tried on several occasions to do it on my own with no help, but with a toddler running around it seemed a little hard to focus.

Thinking about my strengths and weaknesses right now me being a very positive person is working well for me and my husband right now. I always tend to see the good in things and believe everything happens for a reason. Luckily bills will be paid so do not have to worry about that, so I tell my husband, lets just enjoy being in our home that we just got a year ago, enjoy our new and only baby that we have had for a year and a half, since we have never had this time all to ourselves together. I will work the rest of my life and so will my husband so for the meantime we will enjoy this time and stay home and keep social distancing. However, when I procrastinate on assignments I get so stressed out and it's hard to sit and focus. To avoid this with future assignments I will go away to do homework where my baby won't find me and just put on my earphones and complete my homework in sections, rather than trying to do it all a night prior.

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Appendix A

Table 1

Scope of Work and Timeline			
Title: Assessing the Effectiveness of Participant Engagement Strategies			
Project description: Develop Marketing/awareness			
Goal: Increase Participant Engagement			
Primary objective of the project: Improve reading			
Activities		Deliverables	Timeline/deadlines
1	Discuss capstone idea with mentor	Final capstone idea	Oct, 2019
2	Research the community served	Knowledge of the townhomes' community	Sep, 2019
3	Record participant rates	Know number of starting participant rates	Sep 2019
4	Plan activities for the open house	engage the community	Dec 2019
5	Plan open house date, location	Have a date set for project	Jan 2020
6	Meet onsite manager for the townhomes	have a relationship with management	Sep 2019
7	Introduce idea to manager with a date	Set date for the open house	Dec 2019
8	Introduce idea to staff at internship townhome site	Get help from staff	Nov 2019
9	Create poster boards	Set reminders for the community of program dates	Dec 2019

Running head: MARKETING STRATEGIES TO INCREASE PARTICIPANT RATES

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10	Knock door to door	Individual solicitations	Jan 2020
11	Create survey	Know most effective strategy	Mar 2020
13	Check-in with mentor for final materials needed	Final check-in on project	Mar 2020
14	Record participating rates with a survey	Know if my project increased participant rates	Apr 2020