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GRANT PROPOSALS STRENGTHENED BY EXPANDED DIMENSIONS, MULTIPLE LAYERS

Wnioski grantowe poszerzone o nowe wymiary, wielowarstwowość

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A – przygotowanie projektu badania | study design, **B –** zbieranie danych | data collection, **C –** analiza statystyczna | statistical analysis, **D –** interpretacja danych | data interpretation, **E –** przygotowanie maszynopisu | manuscript preparation, **F –** opracowanie piśmiennictwa | literature search, **G –** pozyskanie funduszy | funds collection

SUMMARY

This is not a research report but rather a brief, summary description of an extensive, multi-year and multi-faceted communication research project addressing an issue of considerable importance to communities in the U.S. state of North Carolina, though the issue is common in all other states as well. The project sought to identify strategic communication approaches to encouraging proper disposal of cooking grease among selectively identified population segments. Improper disposal of cooking grease is linked to Sanitary Sewer Overflows, a problem leading to significant public health risks, environmental dangers and mounting repair costs. The case illustrates the merits of incorporating a communication component into public health research grant proposals. What we have learned from this experience is that grant proposals should explore the potential for multi-faceted and collaborative project designs. Limiting proposals to the narrow parameters of the request lacks creative vision that may set your proposal apart. In our case, we defined a problem of sewage overflows as having dimensions of public health, environmental safety and fiscal consequences, then we added the potential for experiential learning, service learning and personal and professional development for our students. Taking this approach amplified the impact of the funding and contributed directly to our winning proposal.

Keywords: public health, strategic communication, experiential learning, service learning, community engagement

STRESZCZENIE

Prezentowany artykuł nie jest raportem naukowym, ale raczej podsumowaniem intensywnego, wieloletniego i wielowarstwowego projektu badawczego dedykowanego problemowi o wielkiej istotności dla populacji mieszkańców Północnej Karoliny, choć sam problem istnieje także i w wielu innych stanach USA. Celem projektu było poszukiwanie skutecznych narzędzi strategicznej komunikacji, dostosowanej do różnych określonych grup społeczeństwa, zachęcającej do właściwego pozbywania się zużytego tłuszczu kuchennego. Niewłaściwa utylizacja olejów smażalniczych jest powiązana z problemami drożności rur kanalizacyjnych, mogącymi prowadzić do zwiększenia ryzyka zdrowia publicznego, zagrożeń środowiska naturalnego oraz rosnących kosztów utrzymania i naprawy kanalizacji. Przypadek ten ilustruje zasady zastosowania właściwych komponentów komunikacji w ramach przygotowywania grantów naukowych w dziedzinie zdrowia publicznego. To, czego nauczyło nas to konkretne doświadczenie, to świadomość, że w składanych wnioskach przy ubieganiu się o grant, ich autorzy powinni podkreślić wielostronność i elementy współpracy w ramach proponowanego projektu. Ograniczanie oferty do wąskich parametrów pozbawia projekt twórczej wizji, co może wpłynąć na jej odrzucenie, W naszym przypadku, określiliśmy problem nadmiaru ścieków w wymiarze jego wpływu na zdrowie publiczne, bezpieczeństwo środowiska oraz jako powodujący konsekwencje finansowe, a następnie dodaliśmy, że przedstawia on ponadto potencjał doświadczalno-poznawczy, uczenia świadczenia usług dla dobra społeczności lokalnej, jak również osobistego i zawodowego rozwoju naszych studentów. Przyjęcie takiego stanowiska istotnie wzmocniło wpływ na pozytywne pozyskanie funduszy i przyczyniło się bezpośrednio do ostatecznego uzyskania grantu na realizację naszego projektu.

Słowa kluczowe: zdrowie publiczne, komunikacja strategiczna, eksperymentalne uczenie się, uczenie świadczenia usług, zaangażowanie na rzecz społeczności lokalnej

(*PU-HSP* 2016; 10, 1: 16–18)

Background

It seems unlikely that a U.S. professor of public relations would be invited to speak at a medical conference and submit an article to appear in this publication. Of course, it is an honor to have these opportunities, though I feel woefully unqualified in both instances. Nevertheless, I hope my remarks will prove of some value. I believe conference planners felt I might provide useful counsel on designing research projects capable of attracting grant support, and I will do my best to offer suggestions in that regard. I will use one recent research project to illustrate my key points.

Description of the project

The project began more than two years ago and elements of the project continue to this day. So far, the project has earned roughly $250,000 in grant support – nearly one million PLN.

The project involves cooking grease disposal and clogged sewers – not a topic typically discussed during medical conferences, but one that has a direct impact on public health and therefore appropriate for the occasion. My aim in relating this story to you is to demonstrate how the mindful crafting of a research project to incorporate multiple layers or components that benefit a variety of constituencies can strengthen the potential for that project to be funded. In this case, I and the other members of the research team seized upon a real problem and proposed an approach to addressing that problem, an approach that introduced fresh perspectives and data-driven strategies. The result has been increased understanding of the nature of the problem and fresh, bold ideas to diminish negative consequences.

This is a case study describing an effort to address the problem of improper disposal of fats, oils and grease (FOG) by population segments in selected cities in the U.S. state of North Carolina. The research and planning team is comprised of faculty members of my home campus, the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. The North Carolina Urban Water Consortium approved and funded the project.

Despite increased system cleaning, root control, rehabilitation, and a long-standing public education program, North Carolina water utilities continue to experience frequent grease-related sanitary sewer overflows (SSOs). These SSOs are routinely associated with improper disposal of fats, oils, and grease (FOG). FOG that is poured down drains or otherwise introduced into the sewer system hardens over time, eventually resulting in blockages. As blockages grow in size and regularity, the probability of SSOs in and near homes and businesses increases. When a sewer line clogs, untreated wastewater is unable to proceed through the system and backs up into living spaces or up through manhole covers and into the street. In dwellings, this often leads to property damage as well as the real possibility of humans or pets coming in contact with bacteria-infested wastewater. On the street, rain will wash contaminated waste into creeks and streams, creating the possibility of fecal coliform bacteria being introduced into waterways precipitating swimming advisories and threats to wildlife. According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, raw sewage can carry bacteria, viruses, protozoa (parasitic organisms), helminths (intestinal worms), and borroughs (inhaled molds and fungi). The diseases they may cause range in severity from mild gastroenteritis (causing stomach cramps and diarrhea) to life-threatening ailments such as cholera, dysentery, infectious hepatitis, and severe gastroenteritis.

The basic direct cost just for clearing a clogged sewer is around $4,000, and that does not include addressing any resulting property or structural damage or required corrective/preventive action. There are no definitive reports on the cost of SSO's in the U.S., but those costs would include system repairs, property damage, health-associated costs, fines and other expenses and would likely reach hundreds of millions of dollars. Throughout the U.S., communities pay to clean up and repair SSO-related damage to sewers, homes, roads, and park and recreation areas. These costs are passed along to consumers and rate payers through taxes and fees. The direct and indirect costs of correcting FOG related SSOs could be significantly reduced, as would risks to public health, if consumers would follow proper disposal procedures.

So this is a complex problem, one with environmental, public health and cost dimensions. A maxim in the U.S. is that to a 5-year-old with a hammer, the whole world is a nail. It is not surprising, then, that when a group of communication researchers analyzed this issue, of course we identified it as a communication problem. In this instance, I think the argument for that is persuasive. To diminish the incidents of sanitary sewer overflows, we needed to change people's behavior, and changing behavior requires effective communication. In fact, it would be difficult to conceive of a problem involving human behavior that did not have a considerable, perhaps dominant communication dimension.

Therefore, our research proposal to the North Carolina Urban Water Consortium revolved around developing a strategic communication plan incorporating the identification of discrete, segmented publics; the crafting of unique, focused messages for each public segment; and the planning of communication strategies and tactics to achieve specific goals and objectives. To develop such a plan requires extensive secondary and primary research, and that effort constituted the first phase of the project. In North Carolina, SSO data identified certain high-density neighborhoods as having elevated incidents, and census data revealed those neighborhoods to represent disproportionately high percentages of Latino residents. Consequently, the research team concentrated on the development of more focused communication efforts directed at those population segments to diminish health, safety and cost consequences. The initial research program led to a 140-page report and collateral presentations to state and municipal officials. Upon approval of the overarching approach to this communication issue, the UNC Charlotte faculty team, supported by graduate and undergraduate students, continued with the development of program materials, working closely with individual municipal utility agencies to tailor materials, strategies and messages to local needs. Those municipalities are now engaged in the early stages of program implementation.

This second phase of the overall project, developing communication materials based on the strategic plan, permitted us to incorporate an additional dimension that further enhanced the merits of the project in the judgment of the funding agency. We included in our proposal the incorporation of project activities into an experiential learning opportunity for advanced public relations students. There is growing recognition in the U.S. of the value of experiential learning and service learning as they contribute to a student's academic experience [1–7]. As part of this phase of our proposal, we advocated the establishment of a "PR Practicum" – an elective course for advanced students, highly selective and limited in size. This course would allow students to work for an actual client and toward addressing a societal issue – in this case, an issue involving public health, environmental safety and monetary costs. Student participation in such an act of "civic responsibility" helps to build mutually beneficial relationships with multiple stakeholders and strengthens the students' awareness of their own citizenship [8–9]. The funding agency very much appreciated the additional benefit that would accrue and endorsed our approach.

Preliminary results of the project

Although communication plan implementation is ongoing, preliminary results are impressive. On the one hand, water utility agencies in the state report their confidence that the recommended communication strategies and tactics appear to be having the desired result. Surveys of utility managers convey the managers' favorable impressions of communication materials and tactics. Awareness of the problem among targeted publics seems to be increasing as is interest in working together with the utilities to reduce the consequences of SSOs. Of course, behavior change is the true goal, and that will be measured by the number of SSOs that occur in the years ahead; the time lag between behavior change and desired results in this case prevents immediate measurement of goal attainment at this time. On the other hand, surveys of students completing the PR Practicum point strongly to the merits of such a course in their personal and professional development. Roughly 2/3 of the students reported having been offered and accepted highly desirable jobs in PR within six months of graduation.

Final remarks

What we have learned from this experience is that grant proposals should explore the potential for multifaceted and collaborative project designs. Limiting proposals to the narrow parameters of the request lacks creative vision that may set your proposal apart. In our case, we defined a problem of sewage overflows as having dimensions of public health, environmental safety and fiscal consequences, then we added the potential for experiential learning, service learning and personal and professional development for our students. Taking this approach amplified the impact of the funding and contributed directly to our winning proposal.

The sources of funding

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The conflict of interests

The author does not report any conflicts of interests.

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