

USING RESEARCH – DOES THE PUBLIC REALLY KNOW YOU?

RON SELLERS

GREY MATTER RESEARCH & CONSULTING

Originally published in *The NonProfit Times*, February, 1993

Marketing research is a lot like common sense: it's worthless unless you put it to use. There's little that is more frustrating for a researcher than to pour time and effort into a project that ends up as a cobweb-gatherer on the CEO's shelf.

Yet making changes in an organization isn't a snap. Ask Dick Power, one of the driving forces behind a research study conducted for the Orange County Boys & Girls Clubs (Power's Costa Mesa club is a member).

The study was designed to help the organization understand the community they serve. It evaluated local residents' awareness of the organization, attitudes about giving, understanding of the work being done by local clubs, perceptions about community needs, and a host of other key topics. The research was partially funded by a grant from a local foundation.

The results were a real eye-opener for local club leaders. For one thing, the research found that the organization's visibility in the community wasn't as great as many of them thought (although it was very favorable compared with other local non-profits). Even more important was that residents who were aware of their local Boys & Girls Clubs had a misperception about their work.

Residents said the most pressing needs of Orange County's kids included gang prevention, drug and alcohol awareness, and educational improvement. But they didn't perceive the Boys & Girls Clubs as very involved in any of these areas.

While respondents saw the organization in a positive light, they didn't know much about how the clubs actually helped kids.

That's when Power and other club leaders came to realize that the public was largely unaware of their organization's real aims and activities. For example, Power says, "We were all doing educational things, but were not really presenting those to the public." So the Boys & Girls Clubs reached a point at which research can take one of two roads: either it becomes an invaluable tool, or it turns out to be a waste of money. Power pressed to make sure that this project took the first direction.

The clubs put together a marketing team to advance the cause of local clubs as well as the county organization. The team is now working towards two main goals: increasing the visibility of the clubs, and making sure that people understand just what they are actually accomplishing with kids, so the Boys & Girls Clubs aren't seen as just places kids can hang after school.

The new marketing plan the Orange County clubs are developing includes:

- Creating a newsletter to keep donors and local community leaders up to date on what's happening with the clubs and the organization.
- Getting parents of the kids in the clubs to donate their professional talents, such as a parent who perhaps works in an ad agency or one who is a public relations specialist.
- Producing a comprehensive brochure about the work of the local clubs.
- Developing regular contacts with the local media.
- Using direct marketing to reach key current and potential donors with a more targeted message.
- Evaluating all communications to make sure the public understands how their donations are leading to real accomplishments.

Progress toward these goals hasn't been easy. Some club leaders are too swamped to even think about more work to advance their cause in the community.

Funds for some of the planned improvements are also tight at this point. In addition, there is limited expertise in some areas of need (although the organization is working on getting help from knowledgeable residents).

According to Power, the plans being developed are not only desirable but also essential. If the public has the wrong idea about the purpose of the clubs, Power says, they're not likely to donate their time or money.

The study required considerable time, effort, and funding. But Power feels that, in the long run, it will be worth it. He also believes that it will eventually help increase donations and grants to the Boys & Girls Clubs.

"People are more impressed with organizations that have done their homework and with people who know their marketplace," he says.

(Ron Sellers designed and conducted this study for the Boys & Girls Clubs before writing this case study for [*The NonProfit Times*](#).)

THE NONPROFIT TIMES

“A vision without the ability to execute is probably a hallucination.”
STEPHEN M. CASE, CO-FOUNDER, AMERICA ONLINE



GREY MATTER
RESEARCH & CONSULTING

3145 E. CHANDLER BLVD. SUITE 110 - 327 PHOENIX, AZ 85048
480.245.6483 • WWW.GREYMATTERRESEARCH.COM