

MARKETING STRATEGIES FOR RECRUITING 4-H MEMBERS IN WEST VIRGINIA

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to ascertain which 4-H marketing methods and messages influenced West Virginia youth to join the 4-H program. 4-H youth between the ages 13 to 18 were surveyed to obtain their perceptions of the most effective marketing methods and messages. Electronic media (Internet information) and word-of-mouth were considered the most effective methods for recruiting potential 4-H members. Active messages, particularly those stressing camps, fun, and friendships were considered the most effective marketing messages for retaining youth in the 4-H program. A statewide plan must be developed utilizing those methods and messages recognized as most effective to offset the recent decline in 4-H membership in West Virginia.

Introduction

The 4-H program helps youth develop leadership skills through participation in projects, meetings, camps, and county or state fair competition. However, the 4-H program cannot help young people develop leadership skills if youth are not aware of or become involved with a local program. During the past several years, 4-H enrollment in West Virginia has decreased significantly (Annual 4-H Enrollment Reports, 1990-96). Identification and use of the most effective recruitment strategies, via analyses of 4-H marketing methods and messages, may help increase awareness of and enrollment in the West Virginia 4-H program.

Marketing methods and messages are often used by nonprofit organizations to increase awareness, attract attention, increase funding support, and attract volunteers. According to Philip Kotler, noted marketing expert, marketing is described as the analysis, planning, implementation and control of... [an

organization's] programs, which have been carefully designed to bring about voluntary exchanges of values with target markets for the purpose of achieving organizational objectives (Hoffman, 1992). Wells, Burnett and Moriarity (1992) define marketing as the strategic process a business uses to satisfy consumer needs and wants through goods and services. Marketing also is attracting the interest of nonprofit organizations [and] US government agencies are showing more interest in developing marketing strategies for public programs (Kotler & Armstrong, 1991).

Marketing messages contained within various media must be carefully formulated. "Advertising can succeed only if commercials gain attention and communicate well" (Kotler & Armstrong, 1991, p. 449). Marketers attempt to discover factors that motivate potential customers and gear marketing messages toward these motivators. Kotler (1994) asserts that one needs to formulate messages that depict some kind of benefit, motivation, identification, or reason why the audience should think about or investigate the

product [service]. Barnes (1993) claims that marketing messages must answer three questions: "What is (are) the derived benefits from [participation in the 4-H program], What is it that your [program] does from which one or more benefits accrue, [and] What does the derived benefit mean to the client?" How well does the West Virginia 4-H program address these questions through its marketing messages?

In a study concerning the organizational effectiveness of 4-H, Stewart (1995) recommended the implementation of a formal recruitment process. Stewart's recommendation was based in part on the study by Diem (1990) who found that 65% of youth who joined 4-H found out about it through their local fair or other 4-H activity. In addition, 51% found out about 4-H from a friend, 16% from a parent, 19% from a brother or sister, 18% from a newspaper, 12% from a teacher or school, 9% from television, and 5% from the radio. All these sources may be classified as marketing methods (Kotler & Armstrong, 1991).

The West Virginia University (WVU) Extension Service may increase 4-H program enrollment by revitalizing its marketing strategy, but first, current marketing methods and messages must be determined. If the WVU Extension Service wants to develop a successful marketing strategy for the state 4-H program, it is imperative that youth assist in determining the types of marketing methods and messages that attracted them to join and remain in a local 4-H club.

The West Virginia 4-H program could be an important venue for educating youth about social skills and leadership development. Also, it may provide the spark for developing interests through experiential programs and projects, but only if youth become aware of the program and are influenced to join and participate in it.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study was to ascertain

which marketing methods and messages influenced West Virginia youth to join the 4-H program. Specific objectives were to:

1. Describe factors that influenced West Virginia youth to join the 4-H program.
2. Determine the marketing methods that convinced youth to join a West Virginia 4-H club.
3. Determine the marketing messages that convinced youth to join a West Virginia 4-H club.

Research Methods

A descriptive survey research method was used to collect data from 4-H members in West Virginia. The population consisted of all 4-H members between the ages of 13 and 18 who live in West Virginia. West Virginia University 4-H Extension Specialists determined the population to be $N = 24,000$.

West Virginia has 55 counties, divided into four geographic regions. Using the methodology of Davis (1971), the researchers ascertained a statewide representative cluster sample of 400 current 4-H members from the population. Excluding the county in which the survey was pre-tested, a simple random sample produced five counties from each of the four districts. Each of these 20 counties received 20 survey forms, for a total of 400 surveys.

A questionnaire was developed by the researchers based upon information gathered from various studies, marketing textbooks, magazine articles and personal experience, which would provide data to meet objectives of the study. The questionnaire consisted of three parts. Part I requested youth to record their reasons for joining 4-H from a list (Table 2) of ten possible choices. The list of reasons was derived from previous studies that had investigated 4-H recruitment techniques (Diem, 1990; Stewart, 1995). Part II requested participants' opinions regarding the most useful marketing methods and messages used

to recruit youth into 4-H. First, participants used a four-point scale (1 = not important, 4 = very important) to rate 25 statements (Table 3) that described various *marketing methods* used to recruit youth into a local 4-H club. Next, respondents used the same four-point scale (1 = not important, 4 = very important) to rate a list of 20 statements (Table 4) that described various *marketing messages* used to recruit youth into a local 4-H club. The list of marketing methods and messages was derived similarly from previous 4-H recruitment studies and from Extension Faculty's personal experience (Diem, 1990; Stewart, 1995; Woloshuk & Mulkeen, personal communications, January, 1997). Part III requested demographic information including age, gender, and place of residence.

Questionnaire pre-testing was conducted with a randomly selected group of 4-H members ($n = 15$) who were not included in the research sample. Cronbach's alpha revealed alpha coefficients of 0.92 for the marketing messages' scale and 0.93 for the marketing methods' scale. Following questionnaire refinement procedures, a packet of 20 questionnaires (each containing cover letters, return envelopes, 4-H stickers, and consent and approval forms) were mailed to 4-H Extension agents in the 20 selected counties. Agents were asked to address and mail the questionnaires to 20 randomly chosen 4-H members between the ages of 13 and 18. A limitation exists in that 4-H agents may not have chosen 4-H members in a completely random manner. A tendency may have been to choose members who were most likely to complete the questionnaire. As such, the researchers were unable to identify which 4-H members had responded to the questionnaire; therefore follow-up procedures were not conducted. The results should not be generalized to all West Virginia 4-H members. Usable questionnaires were returned by 175 of the 400 respondents (44%).

Data collection was initiated on February 1, 1997 and concluded on March 30, 1997. To test for non-response bias, respondents were

categorized as early (February returns) and late (March returns) respondents (Miller & Smith, 1983). Ratings in each category of marketing messages and methods were analyzed using ANOVA tests to determine if significant differences existed between respondent subgroups. No significant differences were found. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze data.

Findings

Respondent data was collected from all four geographic regions, as described by the West Virginia University Extension Service 4-H Program (Western District, $n = 50$; Eastern District, $n = 50$; Central District, $n = 41$; Southern District, $n = 34$). Over 87% of the respondents were between the ages 13 and 16. The respondent group included 62% females. About 42% of the respondents resided on farms while 58% lived in non-farm areas (Table 1).

To answer the first research objective, participants recorded the factors that influenced them to join 4-H (Table 2). Responses included "it sounded fun" (65.1%), "my friends were in it" (61.7%), and "to meet new friends" (56%). Parental and/or familial factors were considered important by more than 40% of the participants. Responses included in the "other reasons" category included to go to camp ($n = 5$), to have an animal project ($n = 3$), to show I care about my community ($n = 2$), to help other people ($n = 2$), and to be a part of a club ($n = 2$).

To answer the second research objective, participants rated their perceived importance of the various **marketing methods** used to convince them to join the 4-H program (Table 3). Using a four-point scale (1 = not important, 4 = very important), respondents recorded the highest ratings for "your friends or classmates telling you about 4-H" ($M = 3.60$) and "4-H information on the Internet" ($M = 3.50$). Tangible items (i.e., book covers, bookmarkers, buttons and pins, and stickers) were given the lowest ratings.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Demographic Data

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percent
Age (\underline{n} =174)	16	38	21.8
	14	36	20.7
	15	34	19.5
	13	27	15.5
	17	21	12.1
	18	18	10.3
Gender (\underline{n} = 174)	Female	107	61.5
	Male	67	38.6
Place of Residence (\underline{n} = 168)	Small Town	91	54.2
	Farm	70	41.7
	Large Town	5	3.0
	City	2	1.2

Table 2. Factors Influencing Respondents to Join 4-H

Item	Frequency ^a	Percent
Sounded fun	114	65.1
Friends were in it	108	61.7
To meet new friends	98	56.0
Parent or guardian wanted me to join	86	49.1
Family was already involved	72	41.1
For the activities offered	51	29.1
Wanted to take a specific project	25	14.3
I was bored. There was nothing to do	22	12.6
Teacher suggested it	12	6.9
Other reasons	25	14.3

^aMultiple answers possible

In answering the third research objective, participants rated their perceived importance of the various **marketing messages** used to convince them to join the 4-H program (Table 4). Using the same scale (1=not important, 4=very important), respondents recorded highest ratings for “you can go to 4-H camp” (\underline{M} = 3.66), “you can be with old friends in 4-H” (\underline{M} = 3.58), and “you can meet new friends in 4-H?” (\underline{M} = 3.50). Fairs, service projects, meeting leaders, projects, and family involvement were considered least important.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The knowledge that marketing methods such as electronic media (Internet information) and word-of-mouth were the most influential factors in recruiting 4-H members indicates that a new marketing strategy is needed in West Virginia. The traditional marketing model, based on tangible items promoting 4-H, is no longer appealing to West Virginia youth who are becoming increasingly Internet savvy.

Table 3. Mean Importance Ratings for Individual Marketing Methods

Statement	<u>M</u>	SD
Your friends or classmates telling you about 4-H	3.60	0.60
4-H information on the Internet	3.50	0.73
County and state fair exhibits about 4-H	3.21	0.87
Television announcements about 4-H	3.20	0.86
4-H exhibits at malls and stores	3.07	0.89
Posters at school about 4-H	3.06	0.88
Signs in stores and arcades about 4-H	3.03	0.83
Booths about 4-H at school fairs	3.00	0.86
Radio announcements about 4-H	2.95	0.90
Adults telling you about 4-H (such as teachers/coaches)	2.93	0.84
Magazine articles about 4-H	2.93	0.83
Billboards along the road about 4-H	2.93	0.85
Mail sent to you about 4-H	2.91	0.90
Unknown people your age telling you about 4-H	2.90	0.83
Videos about 4-H	2.81	1.00
Your parents or guardians telling you about 4-H	2.80	0.90
Special 4-H days at school	2.79	1.00
Pencils/pens with the 4-H clover given to you	2.74	1.04
Letters sent home from school about 4-H	2.67	0.92
Newspaper advertisements about 4-H	2.63	0.89
Bumper stickers about 4-H	2.62	0.96
4-H stickers given to you	2.60	1.02
4-H buttons and pins given to you	2.56	1.00
4-H bookmarkers given to you	2.50	1.03
4-H book covers given to you	2.46	1.04

Note. Scale: 1=Not important; 2 = Somewhat important; 3 = Important; 4 = Very important

The WVU Extension Service must acknowledge that even remote locations in rural West Virginia have attained Internet access. Today's youth are more inclined to use the Internet for gathering information on topics that interest them, including finding out about the benefits gained from participation in a local 4-H program.

Leaders and Extension agents would do well to heed the advice of Kotler (1994), who believed it is necessary to formulate messages that depict some kind of benefit, motivation, identification, or reason why the audience should investigate the product [service]. In this instance, 4-H club leaders and Extension agents need to

formulate a message that attracts attention and identifies the reasons for joining a local 4-H club. The WVU Extension Service should develop an interactive Internet site that incorporates marketing messages with an active appeal (opportunities for participation in 4-H camps and to be with friends) to influence youth to join the 4-H program. This new marketing strategy may have significant impact for other rural states and/or other countries that seek to promote their local youth organizations such as the 4-H program. Based on the findings, additional recommendations included establishing a statewide 4-H marketing model for recruiting new members. Included in this model should be the development of interesting, attractive, and interactive 4-H recruitment

Table 4. Mean Importance Ratings for Individual Marketing Messages

Statement	<u>M</u>	SD
You can go to 4-H camp	3.66	0.66
You can be with old friends in 4-H	3.58	0.57
You can meet new friends in 4-H	3.50	0.67
4-H is fun	3.40	0.74
4-H is exciting	3.38	0.70
4-H helps you feel good about yourself	3.37	0.80
You can help make the world better in 4-H	3.32	0.77
You are free to be creative in 4-H	3.29	0.86
You can help keep the environment clean in 4-H	3.25	0.78
4-H members participate in lots of activities	3.25	0.80
You can learn to be a leader in 4-H	3.21	0.83
You can have a role in decision-making in 4-H	3.16	0.79
You can learn to be responsible in 4-H	3.15	0.87
You can volunteer to help others in 4-H	3.13	0.83
You can learn new things in 4-H	3.11	0.86
You can join in county and state fairs in 4-H	3.04	0.91
You can do 4-H service projects	2.89	0.83
You can meet exciting, caring 4-H leaders	2.84	0.90
4-H members take lots of up-to-date projects	2.79	0.87
Your family can be involved in 4-H	2.74	0.91

Note. Scale: 1 = Not important; 2 = Somewhat important; 3 = Important; 4 = Very important

information and possible “chat rooms” on the World Wide Web. Internet site emphasis should be placed on 4-H activities that promote friendship and fun. While the Internet is useful in gathering information about the 4-H program, promoting the benefits of 4-H club participation by “word-of-mouth” (i.e., current members telling nonmembers about 4-H) should be emphasized to all current 4-H members during local meetings. Also, promoting the benefits of 4-H could be accomplished through school recruitment campaigns, during county and state fairs, and in television advertisements.

Further study is needed to determine the most effective marketing methods and messages for influencing parents to encourage their children to join 4-H. What sources do parents use to find out more information about organizations such as the 4-H program? Similar studies should be conducted in other parts of the country and/or

world to discover the most effective marketing strategies for recruiting 4-H members. How widespread is Internet use for gathering information, attracting attention, and encouraging youth to join their local 4-H program? Youth who want to know more about the 4-H program have opened an electronic door on the Internet. Are we prepared to answer the questions asked upon entry into this virtual gathering place?

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