

Effective Communication Channels for Charitable Sporting Events: A Case Study of Relay-For-Life

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Although many non-profit organizations (NPOs) use charitable sporting events, such as Race for the Cure, Relay for Life, March of Dimes, and other local events, as a means of fundraising, these NPOs have recently faced major financial challenges (Gladden, Mahony, & Apostolopoulou, 2005; Lowell, Silverman, & Taliento, 2001). One of the primary reasons of such financial challenges is due to lack of communication strategies to recruit more participants and donors for the events (Bendapudi, Singh, & Bendapudi, 1996; Bennett, Mousley, Kitchin, & Ali-Choudhury, 2007). In order to increase participants and contributions, it is critical for event organizers to understand the effective communication channels when sending advertising messages to participants. However, there has been a dearth of empirical research regarding effective communication strategies for charitable sporting events. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the effective communication channels for charitable sporting events.

A total of 185 participants were randomly selected from five Relay-For-Life events in a Midwestern state. In order to identify communication channels used at charitable sporting events, the authors used several research methods: a review of the secondary sources, interviews with past participants of charitable events, and a pilot study. The pilot data were collected from 23 participants in a Relay-For-Life event. A total of nine communication channels were identified: colleagues (friends), family members, event staff, event flyers or programs, local newspapers, local TV, local radio, event web sites, and other sources. The participants of this study indicated that the average years of participation for charitable sporting events were 2.5 years and they participated in such events at an average of 3.2 times per year.

The descriptive data analysis of frequency indicated that the three most effective communication channels were: colleagues (n = 142), family members (n = 106), and charitable event staff (n = 86). Specifically, 41.1% (n = 76) of participants stated that colleagues (friends) were the most effective communication channel, followed by family members (28.6%, n = 53) and charitable event staff (10.3%, n = 19). A chi-square analysis of independence (χ^2) was applied to examine if the communication channels differed among demographic variables (gender and age). The results indicated that the top three most effective communication channels did not significantly differ between genders ($\chi^2 = 8.905$, $p = .160$) and ages ($\chi^2 = 12.723$, $p = .1453$). Colleagues (friends), family members, and charitable event staff were the three most effective communication channels for both male and female participants and for all age levels. Specifically, 41.8% of male participants and 40.7% of female participants indicated that colleagues (friends) were the most effective communication channel, while 28.4% male and 28.8% of female participants stated family members and 14.9% male and 7.6% female participants stated event staff members were the most effective communication channels.

The results of this study indicated that the most effective communication channels for charitable sporting events were words of mouth (colleagues, family members, and charitable even staff). These reference groups (colleagues, family members, and charitable even staff) will give significant influence on the decision-making process for future participants as well as on the financial success of the sponsoring organizations. Thus, it is strongly suggested that the charitable organizations using sporting events as a means of fundraising should develop and implement strategies to communicate more effectively with current and past participants and staff members of the events.