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#KeepVolunteeringCool - A Marketing Analysis of the URI Service Corps

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URI Service Corps Marketing Plan

Objective:

How do we get more people involved and make the most out of our trips?

The Alternative Spring Break program began on campus back in 2009 as a subset of the URI Habitat for Humanity and URI S.A.V.E.S service organizations. Starting as just one trip, this organization has exponentially grown to currently offer two local trips and three out-of-state trips during the 2017 break. In total, there have been 23 separate trips, traveling to 13 different states. These trips allow students to, “gain the opportunity to look at the local and global community critically through acts of service, activism, and leadership” (O’Connell and Miller 3). Students broaden their horizons and gain new perspectives of the world around them by being fully engaged within the community they are serving through learning about the culture, history, and various social issues. Due to the fact that these trips have expanded so much and strive to be as inclusive as possible, this year the trips have branched off forming a separate club called the URI Service Corps. The organization has its own Student Senate fund and will host the ASB trips each year from here on. Additionally, the URI Service Corps has been recognized as, “an affiliated chapter of Break Away – a national nonprofit organization that promotes the development of quality alternative break programs through training, assisting, and connecting campuses and communities” (Miller 1). The trips must follow the 8 components of a quality alternative spring break trip to align with Break Away’s goal. The purpose is to work towards making members active citizens in the community, continuing on after they return from the trips. Within this new chapter of URI Service Corps history and as it continues to grow and evolve, it is important to figure out the future potential this club has to make a greater impact on the community and what marketing techniques can assist in this goal.

Community service poses many benefits for not only the individuals that need a helping hand, but for the volunteer themselves as well. It allows people to meet a new network of people and gain a support team of individuals who are passionate about the same issues that they are (Hamp 49). It is also a great way to gain leadership skills that can be applied to work, other clubs, and all other teamwork opportunities. As for health benefits, regular volunteer work leads to, “lower blood pressure, . . . less depression, greater well-being, and a 22% reduction in the risk of dying” (“Volunteering Can Be Good for Both Mind and Body” 3). Unfortunately, despite the many positives associated with service, the rate of volunteers has been declining over the past few years which highlights the great need to get new participants involved. The volunteer rate of American’s over 16 dropped from 28.8% in 2003-2005 to a low of 24.9% in 2015. (Kiersz 1). Between 2012-2013, approximately 1 in 4 Americans regularly volunteered, however, there is room to improve this number and it starts with organizations like the URI Service Corps offering unique ways to get involved (Clolery 1). Seeing the importance of community service and how essential it is to find participants; the questions lends itself to how do we get more individuals involved and help everyone get the most of this experience? The following explores how to

market and improve the URI Service Corps experience, broken down into five steps and three phases: planning, implementation, and control.

Step 1: Business Mission and Objectives

Within the planning phase of the marketing plan, the clubs mission statement must be explicitly defined to clarify what goals should be focused on. This statement is, “a broad description of [the organization’s] objective and the scope of activities it plans to undertake” and is defined in the charter as follows: (Grewal and Levy 28).

Through this program students gain the opportunity to look at the local and global community critically through acts of service, activism, and leadership. Our Alternative Spring Break Trips offer real-life immersion into the social, economic, political, and cultural issues that affect our country today. This organization offers out of the classroom experiences that facilitates critical thinking and problem-solving skills that can be integrated into academia and the community. This program is committed to the Eight Components of a Quality Alternative Break as an affiliate of Break Away. The purpose of this organization shall be to offer service opportunities to all students through Alternative Spring Breaks. (Miller 1)

URI Service Corps main objective is to serve the community, whether it be local or across the country. The club works towards giving students an educational and eye opening experience through hands-on work with various organizations to show students the reality of issues facing our country today. New this year, each trip has its own main objective of a different theme such as disaster relief, homelessness and poverty, or environmental and human rights. They try and tie this theme into all the volunteer work they do and relate it back to the community that they visit. In terms of the objectives within the marketing position itself, promotion is key and should be aimed towards reaching a wider audience and sharing country-wide service stories with the URI community to inspire students to join in and volunteer. In the years to come Service Corps hopes to gain a more diverse group of participants from all different URI clubs and work on education and advocacy on return. This will help trips grow to not only have many participants, but to ensure that everyone is passionate about service, committed, and active members of the group.

In order to ensure that the groups mission and objectives are being met, the four customer, operational, product, and locational excellences must be considered in order to ensure the experience being promoted lives up to expectations and the groups mission. By keeping these excellences in mind and fulfilling them, it allows the organization to gain a competitive advantage over other similar clubs at URI. Starting with customer excellence, this is, “achieved when a firm develops value-based strategies for retaining loyal customers and provides outstanding customer service” (Grewal and Levy 24). This is an experiential club so by providing meaningful service days and holding thoughtful reflections students can get the most out of their weeks and have the best trip possible. From the many returning participants and leaders, it is clear that many people are devoted to the Alternative Spring Break program and want to come back year after year. As for operational excellence, this includes, “efficient operations, excellent supply chain management, and strong relationship with their suppliers” (Grewal and Levy 25). The operations of the Service Corps are all organized by students

themselves so it is up to these individuals to make the process go as efficiently as possible. Since outside sources are often relied on, it is hard to prevent all operational issues, however, by forming the new executive board this helps make the trips easier to plan and execute by taking some of the burden from the student leaders. Moving on to product excellence, this involves, “providing products with high perceived value and effective branding and positioning” (Grewal and Levy 26). The product, in this case the trips themselves, are extremely well planned and offer a meaningful experience, especially since they must follow the 8 components of a quality trip specified by Break Away. Fourth is locational excellence, a factor that is, “sustainable because it is not easily duplicated” (Grewal and Levy 26). This organization has a unique locational aspect in that the locations of the trips are always changing. The variability adds anticipation to the group, however, the stagnant Rhode Island trips offer a set trip that can be reproduced year after year.

Step 2: Situational Analysis

Within the second step, a situational analysis of the organization’s position needs to be explored to further understand the marketing opportunities. By breaking down the internal strengths and weaknesses and external opportunities and threats, the current state of the club can be laid out for future planning and strategizing. Since the spring break trips deal with changes in culture when traveling to different regions of the country, this aspect should be considered in how it effects the experience of the trips and how it may differ from strictly Rhode Island based trips. Students may respond differently to the changes in environment which can pose both pros and cons for the club which may affect how it is marketed.

The URI Service Corps has many strengths that can be utilized to build the clubs reputation and membership. Within the club, there is already a large network of dedicated students and alumni that believe in the message and experience that the spring break trips hold. These students already promote the trips through word of mouth to their friends and peers, spreading the Service Corps message without any effort from the executive team. Additionally, these trips have been running for 8 years meaning that there are many years of experience already behind us. Uncertainties always come up with these changing trips, however there has already been a period of trial and error and the process of planning has been somewhat streamlined for any new student leaders. Since the trips travel to all sorts of different communities, this also allows students to gain a larger perspective of the social issues our country faces that they would not experience without traveling. As for the Rhode Island trips, these offer participants a chance to really explore Rhode Island outside of the URI Community to get a better understanding of the local challenges and culture which is especially great for students from out of state to have a deeper connection with the local community. Another important strength to consider is the many students who hold leadership positions within the organization and help to make the fundraisers, trips, and service possible. With a president, 3 additional executive board members, and 2-4 student leaders per trip there is no shortage of guidance to make the process go as smoothly as possible. The new executive positions, in this case the marketing position, have room to adapt and be modified as the club grows and evolves which is also an internal positive. Since they are so new it will be easy to change them into whatever the trips want or need them to be.

On the other hand, there are some weaknesses that need to be addressed to effectively improve the Service Corps. The biggest weakness is the uncertainty of the URI Service Corps itself in that it is a new organization and it is the first year where there have been executive positions working behind the scenes. The different roles have been laid out by the current board as they see fit but are not fully defined and may change as time goes on which can be a drawback if more responsibilities need to be delegated. Due to the competitive nature of the trips, there are a restricted number of students that can be accepted so not every student who would like to join will be able to. In the past, the out of state trips have been much more popular than the Rhode Island ones, meaning that the attendance and quality of applicants for the in-state trips are lacking. Students are not as interested in these trips because they want to see another part of the country, however, there are students out there whose sole objective is to serve and they do not mind where which are the individuals the in-state trips should target. Another limitation is the conflicts that may arise because there are so many different leaders facilitating the trips their separate leadership styles may clash. It is possible that this could cause some difficulties if students do not find a way to balance the different techniques they use to lead their trips. Finally, a weakness within marketing itself is that up until recently, the social media platforms have not been very active and need improvement to gain a strong following to be an effective form of promotion.

In terms of external opportunities, there are many outside factors that can help the URI Service Corps improve and grow. Exploring ways of working with other organizations to educate the community is something that needs improvement and should be considered. The Alternative Spring Break trips offered are so eye-opening to the participants, however, what students learn and experience is not always shared with the community once they return. Teaming up with other clubs and finding events to raise awareness and advocate for the different causes Service Corps works with would help keep the momentum from the trips going for reorientation back into the local community. This would also create ties with other clubs, possibly leading to outside promotion by them if they believe in the Service Corps' cause. Connecting with other on campus resources is also an opportunity to boost the skill set the Service Corps has. The opportunity to partner with Student Organization Leadership Consultants for a retreat or participate in a challenge course would allow outside leaders to help the Service Corps gain a stronger team bond and would help to improve some of the groups weaker skills, such as communication. Because there has been 9 years of service trips, there is a large network of alumni that are now outside of the organization but may still be able to support through monetary donations or offering connections to promote the trips and share service stories. Perhaps in the future the Service Corps could hold an alumnus banquet to bring together past participants and invite them to help the current group succeed. Outside changes in the environment, politics, and society also offer possibilities when deciding where to go for the trips. If one region of the country experiences a natural disaster, has a community that is struggling, or has some service projects that are unique to that area then these can all pose as reasons for students to travel there and serve and may even be the centralized theme of the trip. There is the opportunity to look at international need as well and possibly broaden the scope of the trips to include other places in the world rather than just the USA if the opportunity presents itself in the future.

Finally there are some outside threats to the URI Service Corps that are out of the clubs control and may affect the trips. The biggest threat to the program is if there is insufficient funding. Since it is all student fundraised, if the fundraising opportunities that have been utilized in the past, such as selling Sweener's chocolates or working with Ivory Ella, do not work out than this may jeopardize the budget for the trips. Another problem is if there is a lack of interest from the student body. If people that are passionate about serving are not interested in going on the spring break trips then the program cannot run which is why it is vital to advertise the experience to generate as much awareness and interest as possible. Beyond the groups control is the Student Senate regulations that dictate the election process and rules to follow. To remain an active organization on campus, all of Senate's protocols must be abided since the budget is now housed through them. A risk that may affect each individual trip is difficulty securing volunteer sites, housing, or showers. Without finding a way to obtain these basic needs a trip cannot run. In the past this has proven to be a difficult for some but groups were able to work through this which is promising for future leaders. A final external factor that poses a challenge is that not everyone can be accepted to go on an Alternative Spring Break trip. The traveling trips in particular are forced to cut students because they are more popular and it is currently not possible to allow every student that is interested on a trip. That is why extra promotion for the Rhode Island trips is needed because they can generally accept more participants due to lower housing and transportation costs.

Step 3: Identify Opportunities

Moving into the implementation phase, the next step in the marketing plan consists of segmenting the population, targeting these segments, and positioning the promotion to interest these groups. This step works to, "identify and evaluate opportunities for increasing sales and profits" (Grewal and Levy 30). In this case, dividing and evaluating groups is meant to increase participation and funds. Beginning with segmentation, which is "the process of dividing the market into groups of customers with different needs, wants, or characteristics", the overall strategy of the Service Corps must first be defined (Grewal and Levy 30). The main goal, as touched upon in the mission statement, is to allow the maximum number of students possible on the trips and to do as much meaningful service as feasible during the week. From here, the market can be broken down into four segments based on individual's loyalty to the group; those who are leading the trips, returners, first time participants, and students who are not involved. The leaders are the only students with guaranteed spots on the trips and have the need for successful planning of the spring break trips. Returners know the value of the experience already and come back, devoted to volunteering. As for new participants, they are aware of the basics behind the trips and show interest, but do not have the same level of commitment. Finally, those not a part of Service Corps may not know the Alternative Spring Break program exists and can either be persuaded to join or lack the want or need to be involved.

Following defining the segments within the URI community, each sector needs to be evaluated in order to decide which market to pursue through targeting (Grewal and Levy 32). A group that is worth engaging is identifiable, substantial, reachable, responsive, and profitable. Keeping these factors in mind, the new participant and uninvolved population are the best

markets to pursue to obtain the most value for the organization. These groups are identifiable in that they have not yet had the Alternative Spring Break experience yet. This is a large market because it includes every student who is not actively involved within the club and reachable due to the fact that they all share one college campus. Most students are willing to hear about the club's mission and are responsive since it is a charitable organization and having any participant join would add value since as many hands as possible are needed to make a difference. The best way to target this group is to continue the mass marketing approach on social media since all students, even those within the organization, can all get similar benefits from doing service and concentrating in-person advertising on this newly identified market. People will not join if they are not informed so education and advocacy are vital in the successful recruitment of new members. Some of the best ways to accomplish this through running booths on campus reaching out to everyone walking by, visiting classrooms and other clubs, and posting flyers around campus promoting the trips.

To effectively position the trip to meet the segmented populations needs, the next step is, "defining the marketing mix variables so that target customers have a clear, distinctive, desirable understanding of what the product does or represents in comparison with competing products" (Grewal and Levy 32). Our competitors must first be identified so that the club can be differentiated from them. On campus, there are a few other service organizations that also work to improve the community and provide volunteer opportunities such as Habitat for Humanity, URI S.A.V.E.S, or Civic Engagement Leaders. Although these clubs all have the same goal of helping the community and similar values, the Service Corps differs in that a year long's worth of prep goes into one week-long event during spring break rather than spaced out volunteer events throughout the year. Something that sets this organization apart is that students are offered the option to travel throughout the country and really become a part of a new community for a week. Because students spend the entire spring break together, this offers a strong bonding opportunity and lets people connect on a deeper level that does not normally happen in other organizations. Different than most competing groups, the Service Corps has a strong relationship with most other service organizations on campus and many students have dual membership. This helps us position our marketing to reach individuals who already enjoy volunteering but have not participated in an Alternative Spring Break trip before.

Step 4: Implement Marketing Mix

The fourth step of the marketing plan is the implementation of the marketing mix broken down into the four P's: product, price, place, promotion. Resources are allocated to each aspect based on the value the target market, new participants, will get from each factor. Starting with product, this encompasses a, "firms attempt to develop products and services that customers perceive as valuable enough to buy" (Grewal and Levy 33). Student leaders dedicate countless hours of planning educational and cultural activities, finding service sites, and hosting meaningful reflections to meet Break Away's regulations. Through providing quality trips, students see the value in paying for a plane ticket and meeting fundraising goals as well as giving up their free time to volunteer with this group. Following with price, "firms charge a price that customers perceive as giving them a good value for the product they receive" (Grewal and Levy

34). The price of the spring break trips are very reasonable because the week can potentially be free for a student if they fundraise enough money individually. The groups work to offer as many fundraising opportunities as possible to lessen the burden of the cost and try and keep the group fundraising goal low for those who are struggling. Students get to explore a new community, travel, and eat for a very responsible rate, especially compared to the cost of going away for spring break on your own. Additionally, the Rhode Island trips are always offered as a cheaper alternative and provide essentially the same experience without the larger travel costs making it a great option for students who may not have much money but still want to be involved.

Place involves making a, “product or service readily available” (Grewal and Levy 34). Something that sets URI Service Corps apart is that the service provided is essentially the Alternative Spring Break trips that are offered only once a year. This may be a downfall since it is a single occurrence and is only offered annually. However, the convenience of being run during spring break while most students have free time and giving the groups plenty of time to plan meaningful trips is necessary to offer Breakaway quality trips. The variability of the location of the trips from year to year also adds to the excitement of each trip being a new and unique volunteer opportunity. The two Rhode Island trips, on the other hand, offer a constant that, for the most part, stays the same keeping a solid local foundation for the organization to grow around. Place is a component that gives the club the opportunity to evolve, perhaps expanding to international trips in the future. This would immensely increase opportunities to experience worldwide issues firsthand and to give participants a completely new perspective. Finally, promotion, “encompasses a variety of communication disciplines...to provide clarity, consistency, and maximum communicative impact” (Grewal and Levy 36). Currently, the Service Corps promotes both in person and online to reach a mix of people at URI. There is a website, Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat all giving the club an online presence. In terms of in person, booths on campus, talking at other clubs, and promotional flyers have all been used to advertise. Both of these methods of marketing can use some work in future years as discussed later on and there are many new ideas that can be implemented. Holding a logo contest, creating and selling merchandise, having giveaways, and keeping an active participant blog are all options to create buzz for the trips. Improving reorientation efforts is especially critical to make sure the URI Service Corps’ many stories are shared on return to ensure that not only the participants, but the community as a whole benefits from the experience.

Step 5: Evaluate Performance

The final step shifts into the control phase working to evaluate performance using a multitude of marketing metrics. “A metric is a measuring system that quantifies a trend, dynamic, or characteristic” (Grewal and Levy 36). Analyzing the social media metrics is a straightforward way to understand the club’s performance online. With 128 Facebook and 62 Instagram followers this club has some exposure but has room to grow, especially with 8 years of participants and experience. Within the insight tools on Facebook, it is calculated that statuses with photos tend to get 43 more clicks and 15 more reactions than written updates alone. This explores the idea that the audience is more visual than looking for lots of information and respond better to quick facts and explanations. The post with the highest reach and share rate was seen by 1,709 people and shared 11 times, proving there is a trend between the number or shares

and the success of the post. By keeping track of post reach, number of likes and shares, and the activity level with followers the club can get a good sense of how well they are connecting to their audience over social media.

When it comes to measuring the success of the promotion efforts for the trips, looking at the applications is a good judge of how well the trips were advertised and explained to the student body. First, counting the number of applicants helps determine how successful efforts were to get students interested in volunteering by how many people actually want to participate. Every year, there are more applicants interested than can be brought on the trips. Although the organization would like to bring everyone they are forced to be selective, showing that what people have heard from marketing or through word-of-mouth is working because the popularity is so high. Within the content of the applications, different outside club participation, other volunteer and leadership experience, and hearing where students heard about the trips all provide insight into which marketing methods actually helped get a diverse applicant pool. Having returners re-apply also proves that participants had such a positive experience they are willing to spend another week doing service and want to come back for more. By analyzing these different metrics, the Service Corps can get a better idea of what marketing techniques are working for them and highlights what they can build on in the future.

Suggestions for the Future

After spending the 2016-2017 year as the URI Service Corps Marketer/Secretary, I have explored some of what does and does not work in promoting our trips. One suggestion that I leave with the future marketers is to keep the social media platforms as active as possible, sharing updates throughout the year to raise awareness and get students interested. Currently, there is a Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat account but a Twitter may be started once the organization gets a larger audience. Encourage everyone to invite friends and family to follow our pages to gain exposure. A good idea would be to highlight a participant/leader of the week, interview members and individuals at the service sites to share their stories, and make sure each fundraising event is posted. Although we just established a new logo to use for now, a logo contest would be a great idea to get those outside of the executive board involved in advertising. Another idea that we have discussed to hopefully implement next year is a weekly blog written by various participants from each of the trips. By hearing from the student's themselves, we can really advertise the full story of what an Alternative Spring Break trip experience is really like from before the trips to after.

In terms of promotion in person, running multiple booths on campus at the beginning of the year will provide a great platform to interact with the target market. Making a flyer for each trip and event that comes up would also be beneficial to spread the word and to give out clear details. Creating merchandise once there is a set logo would be an awesome way to advertise and can give our club exposure throughout campus. With this, periodic giveaways over social media or at events can work to boost club participation and get us more followers. With the strong possibility of international trips in future years, this really opens the door to a whole new segment of students to market to. It is a great opportunity for those who want to make a worldwide impact and travel and see a new culture. One of the most important things to work on is reorientation efforts. There are so many amazing memories, stories, and important issues that need to be

shared with our local community. Figuring out a way to promote the trips while highlighting these important aspects is critical in order to get the most out of the Alternative Spring Break experience. These are just a few suggestions that I think would make a huge impact on the marketing efforts and really help this organization grow.

Breakdown of Project

- Accessed Facebook page and began posting weekly
- Started a URI Service Corps updates page to open communication between the groups and post meeting minutes
- Created a Snapchat account to be used during the week of spring break
- Made an Instagram and started to post pictures from the trips and gain a social media following
- Documented Executive Board positions in a URI Service Corps Manual with resources for each job
- Helped prepare a calendar timeline for each executive role and made an example schedule for future website blog posts
- Prepared a Google Drive album for past participants and current trips to archive photos and as a resource for marketing efforts

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