Developing a Marketing Plan for Estero Fire Rescue

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Abstract

Estero Fire Rescue (EFR) provides fire and emergency services to one of 17 state taxing districts located in southwest Florida. EFR has grown over the years from a volunteer organization to a fully paid fire and EMS service that protects a total of 56 square miles. Within the district, 26 square miles of the 56 hold a majority of the population with a year-round population of 17,000 people that is expected to swell to 30,000 people.

The purpose of this research project was to identify the criteria that should be included for the development of a formal marketing plan for Estero Fire Rescue (EFR).

The problem was EFR did not have a formal documented marketing plan that addressed the marketing needs of the organization that met the changing roles faced by EFR.

The author of this paper utilized three research questions to compile the data needs to address the problem. The three questions asked were:

1. What is marketing?
2. What common components should a fire department marketing plan address?
3. What are other fire departments doing to market their organizations?

The author utilized descriptive research methodologies to compile the data needed to complete this research project.

The author of this paper distributed 100 surveys to various fire departments throughout the United States of America to gauge a response on what those organizations were doing to market the departments.

Based upon the research collected the author recommended that Estero Fire Rescue develop a marketing plan utilizing various recommendations to ensure all areas of concern to the organization are addressed.

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Introduction

The purpose of this research project was to identify the criteria that should be included for the development of a formal marketing plan for Estero Fire Rescue (EFR).

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1. What is marketing?
2. What common components should a fire department marketing plan address?
3. What are other fire departments doing to market their organizations?

The author utilized descriptive research methodologies to compile the data needed to complete this research project. The research was conducted from June 2004 to October 2004.

Background and Significance

Estero Fire Rescue (EFR) provides fire and emergency services to one of 17 state taxing districts located in southwest Florida. The Estero area was settled in 1893 along the banks of the Estero River (EFR, 2001. p.20). In 1964, a group of citizens formed the Estero Volunteer Fire Company No.1. In 1976, the Florida Legislature developed a special taxing district known as "The Estero Fire Protection and Rescue Service District" (EFR, 2001.p.20). EFR has grown over the years from a volunteer organization to a fully paid fire and EMS service that protects a total 56 square miles. Within the district, 26 square miles of the 56 hold a majority of the population with a year-round population of 17,000 people that is expected to swell to 30,000 people. This figure does not account for seasonal visitors and workers which could swell the population to over 50,000 people (EFR, 2001.p.21).

EFR has seen a dramatic increase in call volume. The increase has averaged 20% to 25% per year. With the increase, EFR has also been faced with requests for service that does not include traditional services provided by fire services agencies throughout the Southwest Florida area.

EFR needed to establish major objectives to provide its citizens the highest level of customer service. This entailed knowing the needs and wants of both the internal and external customer. EFR needed to establish a quality of service where the responsibility falls on everyone in the organization for it to work continuously and successfully.

Additionally, during this research project, an article was written in the local news paper critical of area fire districts. This article provided a slanted view of fire district spending and employee salaries based upon perceived duties associated to the fire districts.

This research project provides significance to the National Fire Academy's Executive Fire Officers Programs course on Executive Leadership. A successful leader can help to guide an organization through the inevitable and ongoing changes brought about by the changes in demographics, increase scarcity of resources, and a public with higher expectations.

Literature Review

The future of the fire service is, and will continue to be, driven by changes in society. These changes include new expectations of the citizens served by the fire service including greater accountability for the use of public resources and improving the overall efficiency of programs and services. To keep pace with society, the fire service must review its current mission and determine if that mission will indeed meet the demands of the next century (FEMA, 1998, p.6).

Peter Drucker, of the Drucker Foundation stated, " Innovation requires us to systematically identify changes that have already occurred in business, in demographics, in values, in technology or science, and then look at them as opportunities. "It also requires us to abandon rather than defend yesterday-something that is most difficult for existing companies to do" (FEMA, 1998, p.6).

Marketing can be described as the process of defining, anticipating, creating, and fulfilling customers' needs and wants for products and services. There are seven basic functions of marketing:

1. Customer analysis
2. Delivery of Products/Services
3. Product and service planning
4. Costs
5. Distribution
6. Marketing research
7. Opportunity analysis

Understanding these functions help executive officers identify and evaluate marketing strengths and weaknesses (David, 2001, p.137).

One way for an executive officer to identify marketing needs is by performing a SWOT analysis. This type of analysis identifies strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT). When identifying these areas for utilization in marketing it is very important that the evaluator be completely open and honest. Failure of a true assessment will prevent the organization from identifying marketing needs to enhance performance of the organization (Winer, 2001, p.185).

A fire officer needs to ask three questions concerning emergency service marketing. These questions are:

- What are the major initiatives your department wishes to achieve?
- What are the barriers to achieving those initiatives?
- What are the biggest problems facing your department and why?

When identifying these questions four key elements of marketing can be utilized. The four “Ps” are place, price, products, and promotion (May, B., February 2004 p.84).

Place and proximity bring the service close to the customer. In the fire service the thing that provides the highest visibility of place is the fire station. The fire station is where we keep our apparatus and where we live, train and maintain our watch on the citizens and property in our little corner of the world (May, February 2004, p.84).

The use of the fire station should be a key element in a public service marketing plan. There are at least 10-15 services we can provide in the station for and with our citizens while creating a one on one relationship. Some of these activities are, fire prevention seminars, blood pressure checks, station tours, CPR classes, water safety activities, baby sitting classes, disaster preparedness seminars, fire cadet classes, citizen fire academy, citizen advisory group meetings, safety inspections and explanations to local business groups and businesses, CERT training, planning a home escape and practicing it, apparatus and drill presentations, smoke detector classes, sprinkler classes for citizens and home builders, joint safety classes with police, wellness seminars for the elderly, and fire department meet and greet (May, February 2004, p.84).

Over the past 20 years, the effectiveness of fire prevention and the increase in multiple services from EMS to hazmat have redefined the “product” or services we deliver to our citizens. Many of our citizens “customers” sometimes are confused about what we really do besides fire

protection. The product or service is what we do, the services we deliver to our citizens "the customers" (May, March 2004, p. 74).

A product is basically anything that can be offered to a market for attention, acquisition, use or consumption that could satisfy a need or want. A product could be a physical-tangible good, service, person, organization, place, or idea. The brand "fire department" places fire service organizations in a "stereo-type" mind set with the citizens. Most people do not know all that a fire department does (May, March 2004, p.74).

When considering the potential product of fire service agencies, one only has to look at all the variations under the topic of "homeland security." While we look at these as immediate or emergency preparedness concerns, we also need to consider the evolution and emphasis of present fire and EMS services. When a fire service looks at the product/service it provides, one needs to look at pure customer service. When these services are provided emphasis should be placed on how we treat our customers before, during, and after the incident. Remember, the problem is the customers; a fire department is there to alleviate the situation, or prevent it from occurring in the first place (May, March 2004, p.74).

The promotion of a public service is putting the face of the department in a public place, and by its place in your community, promotion is the public face for the entire U.S. fire service. The promotion of a public service has three objectives:

1. Inform
2. Educate
3. Persuade

Information provides education. The education gives the product a certain value and credibility. It also is a strategic part of the marketing plan because it retains customers.

Education, training, and information require proximity. Fire service agencies are around the people associated with the product or service (May, April 2004, p.38).

Fire services have many areas in which to educate all of the market, not just some of it. So we have the need (just as private enterprise does) to segment our market. Public fire and safety educators do this intuitively by age, gender, socioeconomic status, geographically, and by the type of problem (May, April 2004, p.38).

The promotion mix is the complete communication program. It is the dynamic part of a fire department's marketing or communications plan. This communication plan needs to involve educating and informing, which are critical for the public sector. The fire service may use speakers, the media, public forums, workshops, seminars, meetings, public events, and standard and electronic publication (May, April 2004, p.40).

When promoting, there are three basic kinds of messages. The messages are:

- Rational appeals relate to self interest of the target public. These messages are based on the quality of life, performance, economy or value.
- Emotional appeal attempts to activate feelings that motivate action. In year past the "burning baby" message for budget increases was used. This is an example that might work once, but the long term result is deterioration in credibility.
- Moral appeals, many of which are used for fund raising events.

The promotion mix is the single most important part of the marketing plan besides the strategy itself. It requires thought, preparation, and credibility because in the end its results ensure the safety of the public while informing it of benefits of the fire and emergency service (May, April 2004, p.40).

Fire department leaders will need to promote their vision of the fire service of the future to anyone and everyone who will listen. This audience will include elected officials, fire department employees, and customers. The continued existence of the fire service will hinge on the organizations ability to meet the wants, needs, and expectations of society (FEMA, 1998, p.16).

Customers want a fire service that is fiscally efficient, but at the same time they want the same or more services. In some cases, new services are driven by the desire of the public, and in other cases, the services are needed to ensure adequate fire protection and life safety. There is also the competition from other governmental agencies, and the challenge of competition with private companies (FEMA, 1998, p.19).

Demographic information coupled with incident information, will provide a tremendous amount of knowledge about your target audiences and, more importantly, about members of your community and how best to reach and/or approach them. It can be used for planning education programs, public relations efforts, strategic planning, grant writing, fundraising, policy development, and legislative initiatives (FEMA, 1998, p.42).

The fire service can no longer justify its existence with the potential of a large fire that may break out. Progressive chiefs, public administrators, and elected officials are universal in their position that a public agency must be conducted as a business and have customer appeal with an ultimate goal of customer satisfaction (Norman, 1994).

Competent marketing has tremendous organizational implications. The very existence of a public fire agency may depend upon successfully “selling” the department to the public. If the public is not aware of the multi-functions that a department performs, it may be relevant to fund or support a perceived stagnant agency. It stands to reason that an organization that is well

known and respected by the community will function in a more positive manner, thus maintaining customer satisfaction (Norman, 1994).

Procedures

The procedures used in this research project were to the level to permit replication. This section contains the process used for conducting the research in detail. Any limitations of this research are in this section. The definitions of terms that have an ambiguous concept are in this section.

Definition of Terms

Community Perception – perceived assumption by a population on an organization ability to provide services or products to the community.

Marketing Plan – A plan devised for an organization to educate or inform the public or customers on the products or services delivered by an organization.

Population Make-up – break down of census information of people living within a specific location by age, sex, race, marital status, and income.

Prevention Programs – Educational activities designed to prevent or lessen the impact of accidents or fire encountered by the public.

Service Delivery – Services that are provided by an organization and the efficiency of the delivery.

SWOT analysis- A detailed look of an organization that examines strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats.

An effort was conducted to determine current programs available for marketing fire service organizations. A search was utilized with a narrow scope to include specific articles and documents regarding organizational marketing. Articles utilized were the most current available,

and a target time frame of ten years was utilized. Information was collected from the Learning Resource Center (LRC) located at the National Fire Academy, and additional articles were researched from the internet, and publications supplied from other areas.

100 Fire department organizations located throughout the United States of America were sent surveys to gauge a response. The author was seeking information on what those organizations were already doing to market their respective organizations.

Surveys distributed to the organization were delivered via electronic e-mail. Of the 100 organizations surveyed, 40 of the officials were EFO participants at the time of research project.

The survey was comprised of four questions. The questions were developed by the author to provide feedback on what areas needed to be included in a marketing plan. The four questions were:

1. Does your department have a documented marketing program?

   Yes _____ No _____

2. What are the external areas addressed within your departments marketing program?

   _____ Prevention Programs _____ Service delivery _____ population make-up

   _____ Community perception_____ Fiscal accountability

3. What are the internal areas addressed within your departments marketing program?

   _____ Service Delivery _____ Educational Advancement _____ Strategic Planning

   _____ Promotion and advancement _____ Performance improvement

4. If question 1 was no, does your department plan to address marketing needs?

   Yes____ No____ N/A ____

Once the surveys were returned, the data provided was assigned a numerical number. The data was evaluated and compared to material located within the literature review.

Limitations

The information used in this research paper was the most current and up-to-date. The author limited his search to the past ten years. The survey distribution was limited to the United States of America. This was done to gauge responses from fire service organizations that may have current marketing plans that would provide a guide for EFR to base the development of a marketing plan. Additionally, only 37% of the surveys were returned. Of the surveys returned, 67.5% were not actively marketing their organizations. This limited the author's ability to answer research question three.

This paper was written utilizing APA 4th edition guidelines, and The Executive Fire Officer Program's Operational Policies and Procedures Applied Research Guidelines.

Results

The detailed results of this research paper are located within this section. The specific answers to the research questions asked are located within this section, and the results of the survey are located in this section as well. There are tables located within this section with breakdown the responses returned in the surveys.

The results of the research questions were as follows:

1. What is marketing?

Marketing in its basic form is information and education. It is providing factual information in regards to a product or service provided by a business or organization. Corporations utilize this in presenting a new product or service that is provided to customers in an attempt to increase sales or revenues for their company. Corporations or organizations that provide services utilize marketing to educate customers on what services are available, and how

to access those services when needed. Marketing is also utilized to inform and to educate stakeholders of an organizations development and performance, and to facilitate growth within the organization. Additionally, marketing is utilized to educate individuals of future growth plans and performance enhancement in an attempt to secure adequate funding for those areas of concern.

2. What common components should a fire department marketing plan address?

Components for a marketing plan are endless. A marketing plan should have a basic framework; however, a marketing plan can be developed to a specific need of the organization or it can be developed to meet an organizational need that may not be identified in common fire service delivery. The components of a Marketing plan should do three things. The plan should inform, educate and persuade the community to support the fire department.

A fire department marketing plan should include a mission and a vision statement. These statements provide a framework to build for the development of the plan. The mission statement identifies the department to the internal and the external customers on what the department identifies as its responsibility within the community. The vision statement provides a guide for what the fire department identifies as potential needs for future service delivery.

A fire department marketing plan should include performance initiatives that the department wishes to achieve. The lists of these initiatives are endless, and specific to each organization. Fire departments will have some common areas that are addresses such as prevention, and service delivery; however, the priority of these needs may be different do to a department's ability to meet those areas based upon internal constraints. Therefore, performance initiatives specific to the department, should be identified. Additionally, specific and realistic

time frames should be developed to provide performance measurements for meeting of those initiatives.

A fire department marketing plan should also address future predictions. Now it is not possible to identify all future delivery needs for a department, but a department can identify what areas are likely needed to be addressed by demographic information and changes to the make-up of the community protected. This information will provide data for what service to provide, or what services maybe needed by the fire department.

Finally, an information and educational delivery system needs to be identified. This component is critical for the success of a marketing plan. The marketing plan can be the best ever developed; however, it wont do any good if information is not delivered in an appropriate manner. The information and education delivery system should be developed for the audience that it is intended to be delivered.

3. What are other fire departments doing to market their organizations?

The answer for this question was provided by the data returned from the survey distributed to 100 fire departments throughout the United States of America. 100 surveys were sent out and 37 were returned or 37%. Of the 37 survey returned a numerical value was assigned by dividing the number of returned survey by 100. This provided a percentage value for each answer of 2.7%. The answers for the survey questions are provided in the following tables:

Table 1

Does your organization have a documented marketing plan?	YES	NO
	4 – 10.81%	33–89.10%

Table 2

What are the external areas addressed within your departments marketing plan?

Prevention	Service Delivery	Population
37 – 100%	4 – 10.81%	0 – 0.0%
Community Perception	Fiscal Accountability	
2 – 5.40%	4 – 10.81%	

Table 3

What internal areas are addressed within your departments marketing plan?

Service Delivery	Educational Advancement	Strategic Planning
2 – 5.40%	0 – 0.0%	1 – 2.7%
Promotion and Advancement	Performance improvement	No internal Marketing
1 – 2.7%	1 – 2.7%	32 – 86.4%

Table 4

If question 1 was no, does your department plan to address marketing needs?	Yes	No
	8	25

The results from the survey did not show an overwhelming existence of marketing plans located within the fire service in the United States of America. Based upon the data returned 89.10% of those organizations did not have a documented marketing plans. In contrast, 100% of the departments that returned surveys stated that they were performing marketing functions

within the prevention realm. The author of this paper concluded that prevention has historically been a fire department function, and most organization engage in prevention activities in one way or another.

Finally, there seems to be some interest in marketing; however, 67.5% of the surveys returned stated that those organizations were not planning on addressing marketing, and only 21.6% were planning to do so.

Discussion

The fire service within the United States has typically been a traditional organization that has responded when the community needs them. Historically that need has been to "put the fire out". However, with changing times has come a changing mission for the fire service. The Fire Department just doesn't respond to fires anymore. When an emergency is called into 911, unless a criminal act is being perpetrated, or a law has been broken, the call typically goes to the fire department to handle. A majority of the community does not know every service that a fire department provides.

Marketing in the fire services has been gaining momentum, but it appears that there is much to be done. The community has high expectations of governmental services with high regards for fiscal responsibility. The fire service needs to look at this as an opportunity. Fire departments need to take these opportunities and provide the information and education to the public on the service that is delivered by their local fire department.

Fire departments have been reactive in dealing with increased demands for service, it is time the fire service becomes proactive. Executive Fire Officers need to ask themselves, where is the fire department now, and where does it needs to go? Fire departments need to get their message out, clear cut marketing objectives need to be established, and measurable time frames

need to be established ensuring the public is aware of the many services the fire department provides, and the importance of community support.

Marketing the fire service to the community is only half the battle. Fire Department Executive Officers need to ensure that marketing is done internally as well. Fire service personnel need to informed and educated about what the fire department does as well. Marketing the organization to the internal customer aids the organization in growth and advancement. Personnel need to know where the organization is going and where they fit in that plan. Marketing internally aids in assuring that competent and progressive personnel are prepared for promotion and management transition, this aides the momentum of the organization to continue.

Marketing in the corporate world is not new. Companies market themselves to maintain a competitive edge. Services needing a fire departments response are constantly changing and increasing in complexity. The fire service needs to market themselves to their customers, “the public”, to maintain a competitive edge for additional funding and resources. This will aid the fire service in meeting the needs for the next century.

Recommendations

Based upon the data collected, the author has compiled the following recommendations:

- EFR should conduct a workshop to assess what services are currently being conducted, and what services the organization whishes to provide.
- EFR should conduct a SWOT analysis to gauge the organizations strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats.
- EFR personnel should be surveyed on their personal knowledge of what the organization provides and the future of EFR.

- Based upon the information collected from the SWOT analysis, and the data collected from EFR personnel, a framework should be developed to determine what areas should be addressed and included in the marketing plan.
- EFR should develop a documented marketing plan that addresses all areas of service delivery and internal operations of the organization.
- EFR should develop objectives that are measurable to ensure that the marketing plan is being delivered in an adequate means. Additionally, time frames should be established to reexamine the marketing plan and make any adjustments that are needed.
- EFR should ensure that an adequate information and education system is maintained to properly disseminate the information on the marketing plan, and to initiate the marketing plan.

In closing, if EFR adopts the recommendations provided, the organization should be able to develop a comprehensive marketing plan for current and future needs of the organization. Marketing EFR is a vital function that will aid in the growth and development of the organization.

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Appendix A

September 6, 2004

To: Fire Service Organization Executive

From: Lawrence Nisbet III

To whom it may concern,

I am currently enrolled in the National Fire Academy's Executive Fire Officers Program. Part of this program is that each participant must complete a six month research project. Enclosed you will find a survey for my current research project on fire service marketing programs. Please fill out the survey and return it to me with the envelope enclosed, or electronically to the e-mail address provided on the survey. Thank you for your time in assisting with this research project, your participation is valued.

Lawrence Nisbet III

Executive Fire Officer Participant

Fire Service Marketing Survey

Date _____

1. Does your department have a documented marketing program?

Yes _____ No _____

- If no, proceed to question 4.

2. What are the external areas addressed within your departments marketing program?

_____ Prevention Programs _____ Service delivery _____ population make-up

_____ Community perception_____ Fiscal accountability

3. What are the internal areas addressed within your departments marketing program?

_____ Service Delivery _____ Educational Advancement _____ Strategic Planning

_____ Promotion and advancement _____ Performance improvement

4. If question 1 was no, does your department plan to address marketing needs?

Yes____ No____ N/A ____

Please return to:

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