

A QUESTION OF SERVICE

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About 1970 the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission realized a license increase was a necessity and set out to accomplish this. Since my agency is funded very uniquely, let me digress a moment to explain.

The agency was set aside as a separate, independent branch of state government by a constitutional amendment voted on by the public in 1945. To assure our autonomy, the commission was to be funded entirely by the sale of all hunting and fishing licenses, as was as all the money from fines assessed against illegal sportsmen, but was expressly forbidden to receive public tax money. Thus, licensed fishermen and hunters, instead of the general public, are the flesh-and-blood supporters of the commission and the ones to whom we are solely responsible.

In late 1971 we set out to meet with as many sportsmen's groups as possible to explain our financial crisis. Since the license increase had to be ratified by the state legislature, we appealed to sportsmen to press the matter upon their local law-makers. Naturally, we spoke wherever we could since taxpayers also influence the legislature. This meant taking our sales pitch before civic and service groups as well as sportsmen. We asked each club to take action via a resolution recommending legislative approval of the increase, in addition to being personally involved. Over 75 percent of the sportsmen's groups did as we requested, in overwhelming fashion. Nearly every group sent us a copy of the resolution and advised the legislators to whom the resolution had been sent. My agency felt we would have little problem securing the increase since the request was being made by those who would foot the bill.

The civic clubs surprised us. Only a scant number passed a resolution, and most remained neutral. It was obvious the commission did not have the support of the civic clubs despite the years of working closely with them. The main thrust of this work consisted of presenting programs and making films available. With the need for increased revenue such a pressing issue, we used a hard-sell pitch before civic groups instead of showing them movies. In some instances club members were very vocal and negative toward a sales pitch and griped because a movie was not shown. By my belief, they didn't want facts or education—they wanted to be entertained.

Let's assess the needs of the civic or service clubs. They meet regularly each month, with 30 min. devoted to social contact and eating and the final 30 min. involved in some type of program. Their preference is to view a movie. Any movie. But especially football—especially when the team has a national ranking—or hunting and fishing. But essentially, the need was to fill a 30 min. void.

At one time my division would respond to any club request, and off an I&E man would go—across the state to take the film and in effect serve as nothing more than a film projectionist. And usually for guys who really weren't footing the bill; and at the expense of sportsmen indirectly and the commission directly.

In 1972 the license increase was legally averted by failure to act on the part of the legislature, and in late 1973 we started all over again to get the needed license increase. Only this time our approach to civic clubs took a different approach. We made it clear we welcomed the chance to meet with the club but that they would hear a sales pitch on our financial situation and their need to help us. If this request was not met, we simply sent a film and wished them well.

It was obvious that the commission was investing a considerable sum in manpower, loss of that man's time away from the desk, film projection equipment, films, vehicle expense and maintenance, as well as per diem costs for the man making the program. It was obvious that the commission's assistance to the service clubs was going the wrong way up a one-way street. And anyone knows that among the brand new laws of Murphy is: "You don't feed the hand that bites you."

License fee hikes were finally granted in 1974 and again in 1976, but civic and service clubs did very little to help us with either. The real pressure came from sportsmen who asked the self-imposed 'tax.'

Accordingly, the I&E extension program to civic clubs was altered. Requests for speakers were, as often as possible or practical, referred to field personnel—biologists, wildlife officers, and other qualified speakers—in the club's home area. Films were still made available directly to the club, but usually without the services of a speaker from the home office.

During the past 6 mo. of working with all types of non-sportsmen's clubs, I have spent the first few minutes asking to see the hands of club members who had purchased a current hunting or fishing license. Usually less than half the club responded. This can be accounted by the fact that most, but not all, clubs are composed of men either retired or nearing retirement and who seldom hunted or fished any longer. The younger members were usually those who were licensed sportsmen. In Arkansas, most of the clubs I have dealt with, excepting the greater Little Rock area clubs, have an average of 12 members present for the program.

What all of this means is that regardless of the numbers present, the cost of providing a program in, say Texarkana, is the same whether 12 men or 1200 men are present. Simply put, the more members present the greater return to the commission. In this time of shrinking dollars it is time to put the pencil on conservation efforts and dollars to assure a decent cost: benefit ratio.

Perhaps this is harsh, but it is fact: in Arkansas the commission owes no obligation directly to service clubs. To sportsmen's groups, we are deeply obligated. With that assessment in mind, I wonder if perhaps the following criteria could prevail in determining the question of service to civic clubs:

- (1) Define the type of clubs to whom we are responsive. We could easily turn down requests from non-sportsmen's groups such as garden clubs. For the record, I have made commission programs before mental institutions' funny farm groups, men leaving prison to re-enter society, senior citizen welfare pensioners, anti-hunters, drainage districts favoring channelization, and about the only one left I've looked forward to is some nudist group. The point is that at some juncture we must draw the line and legally say 'No.'
- (2) Provide a film only to clubs whose membership is below 'X' level. As stated previously, this will help balance the cost: benefit ratio. By reducing expenditures to just film mailing, the financial scale is tipped in favor of the conservation agency.
- (3) Where possible—especially in states without regional offices—refer the call to field personnel to handle. Again, we are minimizing expenses.
- (4) In budgeting, designate 'X' amount of funds available for speakers and commission financial investment. To be considered would be the cost of maintaining the film library, equipment for upkeep of film, postage, etc.; vehicle operation and maintenance; and other associated factors. Once the funds or the allotment is exhausted, a club's request can simply be denied on those grounds. However, our effort should not end there. In Arkansas there are other branches of state government that provide the same service, and the club being denied should be advised of the other option within state government. A list of these, with addresses and phone numbers, could be related to the club. After all, we owe some responsibility to the clubs and as much as we might desire we cannot afford to alienate them by being discourteous.

I have developed, with my chief's approval, an open forum type of program and shun simply showing movies. It is somewhat involved, which I can go into later if desired, and does require far more effort and time on my part. But I feel it provides a tremendous return for my agency and is worth everything I put into it.

It seems we have become entrenched over the years in providing service to the civic clubs. But institutionalized actions require periodic scrutiny as times and conditions are ever-changing. Our I&E efforts should run the same course of scrutiny.

In Arkansas, at least, the question of service to the civic clubs has presented itself with results we did not expect nor desire. As a result, the program has been modified without being scrapped and perhaps in time will again need reviewing.

The funding of most conservation agencies in the Southeast varies, and I think most

are largely supported by tax money rather than by direct sportsmen's money. Even so, it's time to assess I&E cost, directions, and methods in dealing with civic clubs. My personal theory is that showing just entertaining movies does little to press home vital issues of the day, such small matters as the impact of channelization, massive clear-cutting, use of persistent chemicals, wildlife habitat loss, and other problems confronting wildlife managers.

In dealing with civic clubs we have a chance to combat our deadliest of foes—ignorance, confusion, and misunderstanding on both sides. To me, the opportunity to meet with a Civitan, Lions, Rotary, Sertoma, or Optimist club is a chance to bridge those gaps and serve out my professional role as a wildlife communicator. Beats being a second or even top Banana.