

Marketing as a Management Tool at the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission

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Abstract: Faced with declines in participation and license revenue, combined with increasing difficulty in securing general revenue funds, the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission leadership concluded that changes in the way the entire agency conducted itself appeared to be the only long term solution to the problem. Marketing principles were instituted agency-wide as a primary management tool. Marketing at the Commission would be a function everyone participated in, not just a promotional department. Problem solving, customer recognition, and orientation have become the guiding force of the agency. Promotional programs have been put into place based on an increased understanding of all stakeholders' wants and needs.

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The Florida Game and Fresh Water (GFC) is using marketing as a management tool to create a cultural change throughout the organization. The primary mission is still the management of the resource, with the component of satisfied customers added to our priorities.

The marketing driven culture in an organization starts at the top. The first change the agency instituted was internal. In 1996 the GFC Strategic Plan mission statement read, "To manage freshwater aquatic and wild animal life and their habitats to perpetuate a diversity of species with densities and distributions that provide sustained ecological, recreational, scientific, educational, aesthetic and economic benefits." This may have been clear to the scientists in the agency, but the entire organization needed to be working toward the mission, so the statement was altered in 1997 to read: "To manage fish and wildlife for the benefit of people and the long-term welfare of the resource." The revised statement speaks to the entire organization so everyone can understand it, adopt it, and apply it to their everyday work.

Part of the internal communication plan was the distribution of a priority issues document by the executive director's office to everyone in the agency. Its purpose was to communicate agency priorities in achieving the mission. It was designed to be simple enough to post on every employee's wall, but still communicate how work should be prioritized.

Healthy resources and satisfied customers together became the ultimate goal and central focus. The agency will accomplish this task by addressing the 4 issues of (1) increasing participation, (2) improving customer service, (3) increasing community involvement, and (4) improving the financial position.

To meet these issues from a marketing perspective, emphasis was placed on improving the (i.e., the fishing experience), working on developing partnerships, and then promoting participation.

Research identified that access to quality fishing areas was an issue with anglers and ex-anglers. The lack of access to quality fishing locations was a concern. There are a lot of implications to this simple conclusion. First, quality is defined by the customer, and some said quality meant uncrowded water. Some said catching a lot of fish. Some said catching trophy size fish. This area of concern was not something promotion could solve. Efforts had to start with fixing the product. Florida is limited by having relatively few bank fishing opportunities and only about 40% of anglers own boats.

Some programs implemented or now being developed to improve the product include special opportunity lakes, community ponds and "Fish Orlando!" To provide a diversity of fishing experiences for Florida anglers, the Commission provides some special opportunity lakes where anglers can choose the types of fishing they desire. For example, Tenoroc Fish Management Area is a 2,430 ha tract of land in central Florida with approximately 405 ha of reclaimed phosphate pits. Lakes on Tenoroc are managed by the Commission to produce quality fishing where the angler can choose the species and type of angling they desire. The area is popular. From October 1996 through June 1997 more than 12,000 anglers used the facility. Two special opportunity lakes have been established, one at the Tenoroc facility and the other at Bienville Plantation. Entrance to these lakes is \$50 per day or possession of a 5-year or lifetime fishing license. The Tenoroc lake not only offers good bass fishing, but allows only 1 boat with up to 3 anglers per fishing day (2 days per week). Anglers seem to appreciate the opportunity to fish their own lake for 1 day. In 4 months, 65 reservations were filled on this catch and release only lake. On the larger Bienville Plantation lake 3 boats per fishing day (2 days per week) are allowed. This one decision to create special opportunity lakes addresses those who want uncrowded waters, those who are looking for trophies, those who want quality bank fishing, and encourages the purchase of 5-year and lifetime licenses. The agency is still evaluating this program with hopes of replicating it throughout the state.

To make fishing accessible, especially to young anglers, the GFC is implementing a community pond program similar to the urban ponds program whereby the Commission will keep the lake stocked if the local neighborhood will maintain the pond and share in some of the maintenance costs. This partnering with the local community should help in their recognizing the value of the resource and our commitment to the public.

"Fish Orlando!" is a comprehensive program directed at Florida's heartland market. This market is not only a top fishing destination in the state; it is also the top tourism market in Florida according to a 1997-visitor study. In partnership with the

Orlando Parks and Recreation Department, the Commission has set out to make this a premier fishing destination. Using this market as a lab of sorts, emphasis is on improving fishing, increasing participation, and referring to it when illustrating the economic impact of angling to communities. The Commission is in the process of identifying candidate fishing sites dispersed throughout the area to improve shoreline fishing, create boat ramps, stock fish, and enhance aquatic habitats. In the area of promotion of "Fish Orlando!" the Commission will sponsor cleanups, several derbies and contests, prepare area fishing maps and fishing tips brochures in conjunction with the private sector, and work with local chambers and travel agents with the ideas of creating more fishing vacations. It is hoped that "Fish Orlando!" will marshal the enthusiasm of volunteers, civic groups, and private industry to reflect the potential social and economic benefits of quality fishing in the Orlando area.

One of the most innovative programs begun addresses the convenience of purchasing licenses. Through a contract with Bass Pro Shops, the GFC now offers instant licenses. The customer, resident or nonresident, can call a toll-free number and get a license instantly with their credit card. Reports of customers calling on cell phones from their boat to purchase licenses have been recorded. The customer said they needed more convenience, and the Commission has given it to them. In the first 60 days the program had almost 3,000 transactions on this system with minimal advertising or promotion. This program required the willingness of law enforcement to institute new systems for license verification.

Promotional focus is almost exclusively on the sale of 5-year licenses for several reasons. First, it is believed someone is less apt to drop the sport if they have a valid license. As the percent of 5-year licenses increases, stabilization in license revenues is anticipated. Paper work processing is reduced 5-fold for each license sold. With less paperwork, the administrative department has more time to provide customer service to subagents. Private sector partners are most interested in more serious anglers who tend to buy the long term licenses.

Programs have been developed to work with pickup truck and sport utility vehicle dealers to use our 5-year licenses as purchase incentives. A majority of angler households purchase these vehicles. As a result, the dealers advertise the free license with purchase. The GFC gets the word out about the availability of 5-year licenses, while the dealers have a relatively inexpensive premium to use for a valued incentive. The program can be embellished by conducting on-site clinics and displays through our wildlife officers and biologists. The program is being extended to include boat dealerships.

The GFC's most publicized promotion has been to offer purchasers of 5-year fishing licenses a bonus pack which included about \$30 worth of samples and another \$270 worth of discounts, rebates, and special offers. Until this promotion, the agency was averaging about 80 5-year licenses sold per month. During the promotional period more than 550 licenses per month were sold. The product samples were secured at no cost to the agency through the American Sportfishing Association (ASA). Their membership saw it as an opportunity to provide sample products to serious anglers. To successfully execute the promotion, the Division of Administrative

Services had an additional workload related to packaging samples with licenses that were mailed out. The Informational Services Office made sure that sports writers they knew gave the program adequate media exposure. The mail room had to deal with the mailing of more than 1,000 packages. All of these groups cooperated because they recognized they all could make a contribution to the agency priorities detailed earlier. The mailing included surveys related to suggestions for improving the fishing experience in Florida and generated about a 10% response rate with good information about the promotion and other wants and needs of our customers. Based on staff input, the program will likely be repeated. During the promotion, it was suggested that the 5-year license be viewed as a VIP license with newsletter and regulation mailings. This is currently under consideration.

To make fishing more rewarding for kids, the GFC added a Kids category to the Big Catch angler recognition program. Now children get a certificate for catches that achieve 75% of the requirement for the overall program. Subagents promote this program via posters provided to be placed in their businesses. The agency is in the process of examining a First Catch category which will commemorate any child's first catch, and it is hoped corporate sponsors will support the program. In 1996 GFC added a Catch and Release Seal to the certificates for those who want to fish responsibly, but still gain recognition. Improvements in the design and promotion of the Big Catch program have increased participation by more than 400% during the first year of the changes.

The GFC strategy is to use legislated funding to improve the product and use as little money as possible to fund promotion. The agency has the ability to reach a quality audience that is of value to many businesses. GFC provides the opportunity for partners to reach a qualified audience of anglers. During the program development the agency tries to build in sponsor opportunities. A few examples of these partnerships are: Tracker Maine sponsors the printing of the boater education books. In return, Tracker Marine gets advertising directed to a qualified audience. Two statewide magazines give the Commission a page of free advertising each month. In return, the Commission gives them a page of editorial copy. The GFC gets the advertising and the publishers reduce some of their editorial costs. In the 5-year license bonus program, 19 sponsors reached the most enthusiastic anglers, and the Commission received the free inventory. In the car dealer and boat dealer promotions the agency gets advertising support and license sales, and the dealers get a strong promotional item. Last year the Commission enhanced its operating budget by more than \$300,000 through the appropriate use of partnering.

About 75% of the population does not fish. They are, in fact, customers of the GFC; they just have different wants and needs. In a piece of research conducted by the GFC; only 24% of the public could correctly name the GFC as the state's primary wildlife management agency. To 77% of the public the agency was irrelevant. Yet this group is represented by their legislators when it comes time to secure funding, favorable legislation, or other public action that requires broad-based support. And once again, like any potential customer it is simply a case of finding out what this constituency wants and giving it to them.

The GFC believes there are 2 critical areas today that can be addressed to become more relevant to this group. These 2 areas, sometimes overlooked, are the job creation and economic impacts of nature-based recreation. In Florida, a 1997 visitor study determined that for every 60 tourists, 1 job was created. Currently, 135,000 nonresidents purchase freshwater fishing licenses. This equates to more than 2,200 tourism-related jobs. Bait and tackle shops in Florida collect more than \$1 million in sales taxes. In some counties, more nonresident licenses than resident licenses are sold. As an industry, angling is important to the economic health of these areas. In the United States, the 1996 Recreation Roundtable indicated twice as many people fish as play golf, yet Florida has invested in 1,100 golf courses and promotes golf to encourage tourism and economic growth. It is critical that game and fish agencies get the economic and jobs impact of the industry out to the public and to policy makers.

In 1997, the Commission was able to have the sales tax applied to fishing tournament entry fees repealed after several years of attempts. The case was won by illustrating that a major tournament generates almost \$300,000 in direct expenditures in predominantly rural communities. Illustrating the economic benefits of a repeal enabled the agency to get legislation passed. Using economic impact arguments, the GFC has been able to encourage communities to invest in fishing resources and promote themselves as fishing destinations. In these communities the GFC has become relevant to a broader spectrum of anglers and non-anglers. The agency has positioned itself as an economic partner as well as a quality of life agency.

To address this diverse audience the commission encourages staff to attend and speak at Chambers of Commerce, Tourism Development Council, and county commission meetings. Press releases are no longer limited to just outdoor writers. The GFC develops the economic impact implications of its work and sends releases to business and government writers. Prior to legislative sessions, legislators are briefed on the positive economic impact of projects and reminders are sent to them throughout the year when the agency invests in their districts or participates in any local economic development programs. Emphasis is placed on job creation and economic impact. It is important to promote to this group and they should be included in all marketing plans.

In summary, marketing programs may help increase participation and support of recreational sport fishing as long as it is recognized that marketing is a function not just a department and that wildlife agencies can no longer conduct business as usual. Everyone in the organization and industry is going to have to accept some changes to become part of the solution.