

Retention and Recruitment

Marketing Efforts to Increase Fishing Participation In Oklahoma: A Case History

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Abstract: The Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation (ODWC) has become increasingly concerned about stagnant or declining fishing license sales and a 50% turnover rate among annual fishing license holders. Marketing campaigns were initiated in Oklahoma in an attempt to reverse the trend. During 2001, ODWC partnered with the Recreational Boating and Fishing Foundation (RBFF) to test the effect of supplementing the RBFF national campaign with local marketing efforts. Local fishing directories were produced, RBFF advertising images and messages were customized for advertising, and both were directed at two local test markets of anglers with a sporadic license buying history. The pre- and post-test evaluation revealed that the campaign was successful at increasing awareness of fishing and boating as recreational activities and that direct mail was the most effective delivery mechanism for campaign messages. During 2002, ODWC expanded the campaign to the entire state but used only direct mail and refined the target segment to male license holders of the age cohort likely to have children and having a sporadic license buying history. Half of the target market received one postcard mailing. The other half of the target market received a value-added packet of fishing information as well as the postcard. Both direct mailings appeared to boost renewal rates. Campaign lessons learned and implications for marketing efforts in other states are discussed.

Key words: marketing, licenses, participation, awareness, RBFF

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In recent years, the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation (ODWC) has become increasingly concerned about the general decline in fishing participation, as indicated by the general decline in annual fishing license sales, experienced in Oklahoma since the 1970s. Additionally, Oklahoma has experienced license sales “churn” common to many states: the overall number of annual fishing license holders has remained fairly constant while many of the individuals holding those licenses differ from year to year. In Oklahoma, the annual renewal rate for fishing license holders is approximately 50% (unpublished data, ODWC).

Following an October 1999 ODWC workshop led by M. Duda of Responsive Management, "Factors Related to Fishing Participation," a Fishing Recruitment and Retention Committee was formed within ODWC. This committee met numerous times over the following year to discuss modification of the Fisheries Division strategic plan to address the problems of fishing license holder recruitment and retention. As part of the plan, the committee commissioned a Fishing Motivation Survey of sporadic and new Oklahoma fishing license buyers, to investigate reasons for fishing, barriers to fishing, typical fishing behavior, possible incentives for fishing, and fishing satisfaction. Armed with this information but lacking clarity on the next appropriate step, ODWC worked with a contractor to develop a marketing plan to increase fishing awareness and participation in Oklahoma.

Simultaneously, ODWC was aware of and closely followed the activities and progress of the Recreational Boating and Fishing Foundation (RBFF) as a national campaign was developed to address declines in fishing and boating participation. Between December 2000 and March 2001, ODWC worked closely with RBFF to capitalize on any opportunity to partner efforts in the outreach campaign. ODWC was able to expand the focus of the Oklahoma campaign to include boating activities and become one of three pilot states to supplement the national "Water Works Wonders" campaign with significant local efforts. On 1 March 2001, ODWC entered into a cooperative agreement with RBFF to cost-share Oklahoma's local fishing and boating outreach campaign.

Through the cooperative efforts of ODWC, RBFF, and a campaign contractor, the local efforts to increase fishing and boating awareness and participation in Oklahoma were implemented in two pilot communities during 2001. Pre- and post-campaign surveys were analyzed to determine the success of the campaign efforts.

In 2002 a second campaign was undertaken. Unlike the previous year, this effort was specifically directed at increasing retention of a particular target group through a direct mailing of fishing information and materials. Again, ODWC took advantage of the materials and advertising used in the national RBFF campaign.

Campaign Strategy

2001 Campaign

Countless number of planning meetings and discussions among ODWC employees, RBFF, and the local campaign contractor occurred during the campaign development process. As the specific local plans were developed, more specialized weekly and even daily meetings and discussions were held between Fisheries Division employees and the campaign contractor. It is a generally accepted marketing philosophy that increasing awareness is necessary before any expected change in behavior, therefore the first logical step for Oklahoma was to attempt an increase in fishing and boating awareness at a local level and to test which outreach methods were best suited to obtain this goal. The target audience would be anglers that were low on the avidity scale and sporadic in their participation (occasional anglers).

Although ODWC felt that abundant internal and external research data was

available for understanding the behaviors and attitudes of infrequent anglers and boaters, the agency lacked the marketing expertise and confidence necessary to apply the knowledge to a successful campaign. A marketing consultant was hired to develop a pilot marketing strategy for Oklahoma. The strategy ultimately focused on two target communities, Norman and Muskogee, and two control communities for comparison, Broken Arrow and Bartlesville, April through June 2001.

It was determined from previous internal and external survey research data that information about where to fish, how to fish, and when to fish were barriers to participation among infrequent and new anglers (Responsive Management 1999, Summers and Crews 2002). This previous research also suggested that a child's request to go fishing was a strong motivation for parents to participate. Based on these research findings, local fishing directories were developed for the two target communities with messages, images, and information appealing to occasional anglers.

Two-sided, color, map-folded directories (44.4 x 589.3 cm) were customized for each of the target communities. Both local fishing directories featured close-to-home fishing opportunities, driving directions, specific places to fish at each location, information about fish species present, regulations specific to each area, and baits to use for different species. Additional information included public facilities available at each location, other opportunities for wildlife-related recreation on-site, where to purchase a fishing license, other nearby area fishing locations, boating safety, and ODWC informational phone numbers and websites. To capitalize on the motivation of a request from a child, the back side of the directory included the RBFF image of a small girl with the "Take me fishing because my wedding will be sooner than you think . . ." message.

These directories were the cornerstones of both local campaigns. Personnel from ODWC's Oklahoma Fishery Research Laboratory and the NE Regional Fisheries Office, along with ODWC's Responsive Management Specialist were instrumental in the planning and development of the local fishing directories. Several iterations of each fishing directory were developed before the final selection was made.

The directories were also supported by regular purchases in local media (i.e., newspaper and radio advertisements, utility bill inserts) and by free advertising around each community. Black and white newspaper advertisements ran three times weekly (Thursday, Friday and Sunday) in the local Norman and Muskogee newspapers. Four different advertisements were used over the course of the campaign in both communities. Full-page, color advertisements were also purchased in each community newspaper. The Norman Transcript featured an additional "wrapper," which was a full page, front and back, black and white reproduction of the directory and used to enclose coupons and other circulars in a Sunday edition. Both newspapers ran extra fishing and boating news articles to supplement the campaign, leveraged as a result of the advertising purchases. Radio advertisements aired 16 times each weekend (Thursday-Saturday), over four different stations, in each community. Utility bill inserts were provided monthly in Muskogee during April, May, and June outlining local fishing events and where to obtain directories. Additionally, many local businesses in both communities were provided a poster version of the directory to display in the front window and a door sticker to announce that directories could be obtained inside.

The campaign marketing consultant regularly conferred with ODWC personnel as to the design and frequency of the advertising.

ODWC personnel had the sole responsibility for fishing directory distribution in each community. The number of directories printed was based on the population in each community, 30,000 for Norman and 20,000 for Muskogee. In Muskogee, 54 different venues were found to distribute directories and 69 were found in Norman. These sites ranged from public facilities (e.g., government offices) to local fishing and non-fishing retailers. Directory countertop display boxes, posters, and door stickers were distributed along with the directories in both communities, serving to alert residents to the availability of the directory.

About 15,000 directories were initially distributed in each of the two communities. Neither the directories nor their information were time-dated, and therefore the distribution of the remaining directories can continue over time. Additionally, 5,500 directories were direct mailed in Norman and 3,500 directories direct mailed in Muskogee. The direct mail targeted sporadic anglers (i.e., purchased an annual fishing or combination fishing/hunting license in 2000 but not 1999, and also in one or two of the years between 1995–1998), lapsed anglers (i.e., purchased an annual license in 1999 but not 2000, and also in one or two of the years between 1995–1998), and new anglers (i.e., purchased an annual license in 2000 but not in any of the years between 1995–1999). Since the directories were mailed using non-profit, bulk rates, no evaluation of undeliverable incidence was possible.

2002 Campaign

Having successfully raised awareness of fishing and boating during the 2001 campaign, the 2002 campaign turned to the next step of increasing fishing participation. This time, occasional anglers were directly encouraged to buy a license and go fishing.

The target market for 2002 was identified as male anglers, age 28 to 55 years of age, who had purchased a license in 2001 but not in 2000 and had purchased a license only one or two times in the period from 1995 through 1999. They were described as sporadic, drop-in anglers, and were located throughout the state. This target market was selected based on previous research results indicating that the male head-of-household typically makes decisions regarding outdoor activities for the family. Just over 25,000 Oklahoma anglers fit the campaign definition of an occasional angler during 2002.

Half of the target market anglers were randomly selected to receive a specially designed direct mail packet of information to encourage them to renew their license. This “value added” packet contained a family-friendly cover letter, a copy of the 2002 Fishing Guide (regulations), two renew-by-mail license order forms, a 8.9 x 11.4 cm refrigerator magnet/picture frame imprinted with a reminder to “get a license and go fishing,” a discount coupon for “Outdoor Oklahoma” magazine, and a discount coupon for Bass Pro Shops. These 12,000 drop-in anglers were also mailed a reminder postcard full color, “Take Me Fishing . . .” message) four weeks after the value-added packet.

The other half of the target market received only the postcard at the same time

the other group received their postcard as a reminder. In total, 24,000 occasional anglers were sent something by direct mail during the 2002 campaign. Non-profit bulk mail postage rates were used, therefore the undeliverable rate was unknown.

Lessons Learned

2001 Campaign

The purpose of the 2001 campaign was to determine: 1.) whether ODWC, through local marketing efforts, supplemented by the national RBF campaign, was able to increase fishing awareness in a community, especially among occasional anglers, and 2.) what were the best vehicles to deliver the target message. Pre- and post-campaign surveys were used to evaluate the success of the 2001 campaign. From these surveys it was determined:

1. Overall awareness of any type of RBF advertising was significantly higher in the two experimental communities when compared to the control cities ($p \leq .05$ used for all significant comparisons).

2. Direct mail was the most useful tool in raising fishing awareness in the two experimental communities, followed by (in order of decreasing impact) local business displays of the poster, the utility bill insert, newspaper ads and inserts, countertop displays, and radio.

3. When individuals saw countertop displays, store front posters, utility bill inserts, newspaper and radio advertising (multiple touches with campaign imagery) they had significantly higher awareness of fishing. Single contacts were not as effective.

4. People who recalled receiving the directory were significantly ($p \leq 0.05$) more likely to go fishing than those who did not.

5. More than 90% of the target audience who received the directory found it useful, 72% said it encouraged them to go fishing.

6. Seventy percent of the anglers receiving a directory went to one of the local fishing areas featured in the directory.

7. People who indicated they saw both the advertising and received the directory were twice as likely to purchase a license as those who only saw the advertising or only received the directory.

8. Overall, directory recipients were more likely to renew their 2001 fishing license than non-recipients, with the biggest renewal increase seen in first-time buyers in 2000.

2002 Campaign

Although the 2001 campaign suggested that a single contact was not as effective as multiple contacts in raising fishing awareness, financial constraints often dictate the intensity of marketing efforts on a state-wide basis. Such was the case for Oklahoma's 2002 campaign. Armed with a U.S. \$10,000 budget, only one or two contacts with the target market could be made on a statewide basis.

Since the 2002 campaign message included a direct appeal to buy a license, the

evaluation mechanism was 2002 license sales. The entire target market was included in the campaign, not allowing for a direct comparison between control and experimental groups. Instead, 2002 renewal rates for the target market were compared to renewal rates for the demographically comparable target market in 2001 as found in the ODWC license database. The fishing license renewal rate of the comparable target market in 2001 was 34.3%. The 2002 campaign yielded the following results:

1. The renewal rate for those receiving only the postcard was 37.3%, a 3% increase over the previous year.

2. The renewal rate for targeted license holders receiving the value-added packet and a follow-up postcard was 38.3% in 2002, a 4% increase over the previous year.

3. The postcard-only half of the campaign cost \$0.15 per targeted license holder, including production and mailing. The value-added packet and follow-up postcard cost \$0.61 per license holder targeted in the other half of the campaign. The 1% increase in renewal rate resulting from the value-added packet was not enough to justify the added expense (\$0.46).

4. The increased renewal rates for Oklahoma's 2002 campaign translated to over \$22,000 in increased agency revenue. With a \$10,000 expenditure, it was clearly a profitable undertaking.

5. The reported \$10,000 expense only included the direct cost of producing and mailing the provided materials. ODWC employee time spent selecting the target market from the database, preparing the mailing list, conceptualizing campaign strategies and messages and evaluating campaign success was not included in the cost-benefit analysis. If an agency was to turn-key the entire campaign process, it might not be profitable. This would suggest that agencies must devote personnel time covered in existing budgets toward these efforts in order to be successful.

6. Only 208 of 12,000 license holders receiving the value-added packet elected to use the renew-by-mail offer. Results from Oklahoma's 2000 Occasional Angler Motivation Survey (Summers and Crews 2002) showed that the process of obtaining a license was not a barrier to fishing participation. In light of these two findings, the mail renewal option does not appear to be a successful enticement for occasional anglers.

Other Marketing Campaign Considerations

Situational analysis is the first and most important step in developing any good marketing plan. Agencies should ask themselves, "Where are we? Who are our customers? What do they want?" Although this may seem daunting to an agency not used to conducting business in this way, it is absolutely necessary in conducting a successful marketing campaign.

Agencies with point-of-sale licensing and/or ones that have developed an electronic license database are much further ahead in the marketing game. The license database generally represents a wealth of knowledge about the state's fishing customers that most retailers or manufacturers would love to have. Agencies that store their license stubs in boxes in the agency basement should consider building this important profile of their customers, even though it may seem to be a monumental task.

Agencies thinking of beginning a marketing strategy should consider using the free creative materials and messages already developed by RBFF. RBFF has gone to great lengths and substantial expense to generate these quality products. Additionally, RBFF is continuing a national campaign using these creative products, therefore providing free additional exposure for local campaign messages which use the same imagery.

If an agency is contemplating contracting a marketing firm to help with their campaign, consider finding an agency with experience in marketing outdoor products. These firms have a better grasp of targets associated with this type of marketing. They may also have local connections that can be used to negotiate additional campaign exposure through the local media at the time of purchasing advertising space.

Our experience with the pre- and post-campaign evaluation surveys (first class mail) suggests that delivery rates for license holder addresses two years out of date (1999 license holders) was approximately 25% less than delivery rates for addresses only one year old (2000 license holders). This could have significant consequences in marketing to targets from past license years.

After communicating with other agencies and organizations regarding the effect of marketing efforts on the goal of increasing fishing participation and license sales, Oklahoma concluded that there is no "magic bullet" to solve all the financial problems and participation declines currently facing natural resource agencies. Various segments of the angling public will respond to different messages, different incentives and different delivery methods. Results witnessed in Oklahoma and by other states are promising, but we are only beginning to scratch the surface with our marketing efforts. It appears that we are in this for the long haul, and that we must maintain our momentum to have any hope of achieving our mutual objectives.

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