


A Social Marketing Based Strategy For Planning Diversity Events

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ABSTRACT

Organizations are both enriched and challenged by diversity. Organizational diversity management is based on several factors such as strategy, competitive positioning and internal culture. Most organizations hold events of various kinds as part of their diversity strategy. Although participation in events is often mandated, such as in training programs, providing opportunities for voluntary participation is also important. In particular, organizing events in which participation is voluntary signals that management is willing to be responsive and flexible. Events, in general, are a highly visible aspect of diversity programs and serve many purposes, such as providing information, building awareness and creating social capital. On the other hand, there are associated costs. Consequently, organizations need to plan events carefully in order to obtain their full benefit. This paper presents a comprehensive strategy for planning, publicising and organizing diversity related events. The strategy addresses the interests and needs of all individuals in the organization with a goal of maximizing voluntary participation. A simple yet powerful method from (social) marketing is used in constructing the comprehensive strategy: that of market segmentation. In this paper, individuals in an organization are classified into four segments. Events, too, are classified into four types – support, celebratory, educational and training. Each segment responds best to a specific type of event. This link between segments and events is used to formulate the strategy that recommends organizing all four types of events, during a planning period, as part of the diversity management effort.

INTRODUCTION

iversity is a reality for organizations today, presenting opportunities as well as challenges. Organizations have come to view these challenges not only from a managerial perspective, but also from strategic and competitive viewpoints (Allers 2005, Friday and Friday 2003). They have responded to diversity by instituting policies, procedures and practices. In more specific ways organizations have appointed personnel to manage diversity or hired training consultants (GAO 2005, Johansson 2005, National Urban League, New York Times, Redford 2005, Rijamampianina and Carmichael 2005).

Different organizations have designed and implemented different approaches to managing diversity. In an attempt for diversity programs to reach all members, organizations often mandate participation. However, there is some advantage to offering programs where participation is voluntary. They can be used to signal the organization's willingness to be flexible and responsive. Consequently, such programs may be perceived to relate more directly to members' needs and concerns and tend to have a greater buy-in. A caveat is that voluntary programs face the continual challenge of attracting participants. Mandatory programs, on the other hand, typically have high levels of participation, although the impact on participants can vary widely (Ellis and Sonnenfeld 1994). Participant reactions can run the range from feeling empowered, to viewing it as paying lip-service in order to be "politically correct" and finally, resentment at being forced to participate (Lindsay 1994), with consequent "backlash" (Bond and Pyle 1998, Kidder, Lankau et al. 2004). This has led to a debate regarding the relative effectiveness of mandatory programs as compared to voluntary ones (Ellis and Sonenfeld quoting Alderfer, 1994, Stockdale and Cao 2004). Both approaches are adopted by organizations in their attempt to implement effective diversity programs (Ellis and Sonenfeld 1994).

In common parlance, diversity is often understood to refer to race, ethnicity or gender. This definition is sometimes expanded to include other factors such as age or physical abilities. However, recent work suggests using even broader definitions of diversity, framing them in particular contexts, such as psychological, organizational, situational or outcome-related (Cox 2001, Cross 2000, Janssens and Zanoni 2005, Thiederman 2003). While acknowledging that multiple definitions exist, this paper uses a most general definition of diversity, simply as “being different from the norm in some significant way”. By using this definition, the strategy proposed in the paper remains applicable even as the incidence and impact of various factors leading to diversity change.

The focus in this paper is on diversity related events where participation is voluntary. The individuals in the organization will be referred to as a “community”. Events function as platforms to address diversity related topics, concerns or issues (Gillis 2001, Redford 2005). Examples of events are “culture days”, training sessions and talks by experts or invited speakers. Diversity events are usually considered successful if they meet goals of imparting information or providing skills and support to participants. In order to justify the resource outlay, it is important that events draw sufficient number of participants. When participation is by choice, rather than required, this is a challenge as well as an important indicator to planners.

In general, diversity efforts often meet with unexpected and varied reactions (Bendick et al. 2001, Cox 2001). Not being able to understand the reasons behind this variability can lead to feelings of failure on the part of planners and friction between different groups within the organization, ultimately resulting in the abandonment of the diversity efforts. The strategy presented in this paper aims to avoid the frustration arising from either not knowing or not meeting needs and expectations regarding diversity. Individuals in the organization are viewed as having different diversity needs and the strategy proposes a diversity program that meets this range of needs.

The model and methods presented in this paper have been used for several years in an educational setting, specifically in organizing events aimed towards parents. Schools have been at the forefront of diversity changes. They have faced opportunities and challenges similar to that of other organizations. Demographic changes have led to rapid increases in student diversity in terms of culture, language and family structures (Council 2000, NCES 2002). Other types of diversity found in schools are gender, behaviour and learning style differences (Gardner 1993, Gurian & Henley 2001, Kindlon & Thompson 1999, Levine 2002). Increasing diversity has driven schools to alter the way they deliver education. Schools also take into consideration the importance of parental and family involvement to the success of the diversity program and provide opportunities for it. Parent oriented diversity events are similar to organizational ones in which participation is voluntary. They have the same challenges of identifying issues of importance (to the organization as well as to individuals), gauging people’s interest and willingness to participate and offering well-planned programs. In particular, the strategy presented in this paper was implemented at an independent school, a non-profit organization that functions in many ways similar to businesses. Thus, there is an easy translation of the strategy to more general organizational settings.

APPLYING SOCIAL MARKETING TO DIVERSITY EVENTS

Social marketing is the use of marketing principles and techniques to influence a target audience to voluntarily accept, reject, modify, or abandon a behavior for the benefit of individuals, groups or society as a whole (Kotler, Roberto and Lee 2002).

Social marketing methods have been used successfully in many applications (Kotler, Roberto and Lee 2002). Social marketing views people, towards whom social programs are directed, as “target customers” and uses the basic 4P’s of marketing – product, price, place and promotion, to achieve desired goals.

Diversity programs lend themselves readily to an interpretation of social marketing concepts. A goal of diversity programs is for individuals to re-examine and change their existing beliefs (for example, women with children have lower degree of professional commitment), attitudes (for example, stereotyping by characterizing traits of certain ethnic groups as “lazy” or, at the other end of the spectrum, as “industrious”) and behaviors (for example, avoiding social contact with certain groups). The four “P”’s can be interpreted as follows. The “product” in diversity programs is information, knowledge or skills. “Place” is not a major consideration for programs that take place at a

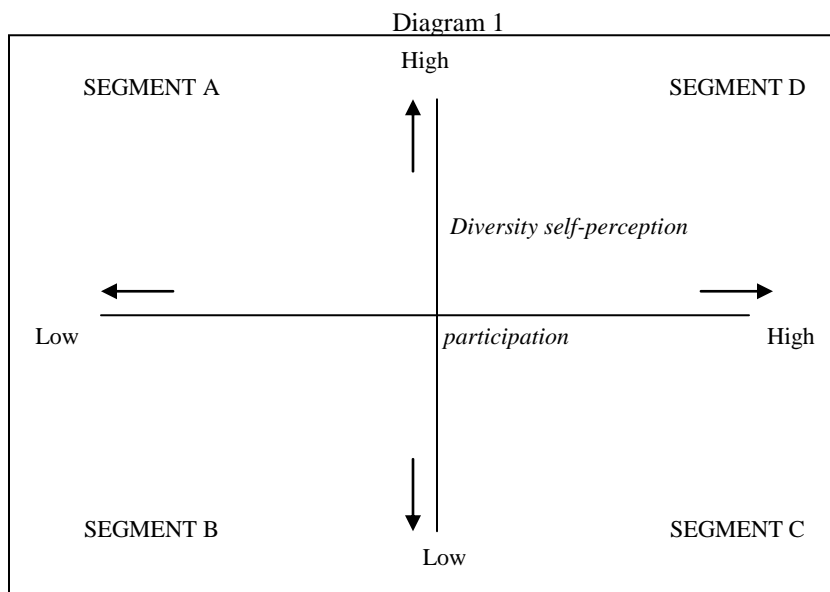
single or central facility. If located across geographically dispersed facilities elsewhere, making sure that individuals have access, and that the programs are locally relevant, is important. The “price” that people pay in diversity programs is complex and based on a variety of factors. It includes giving up existing beliefs, attitudes and behaviors, many of which are long-standing and well entrenched. It can include time: when participation is voluntary, this is essentially personal time. Finally, price can also include actual costs such as for material (example, books), transportation or childcare. “Promotion” includes means by which the community is made aware of the different events. Typically, this is done by posting notices on organizational websites or around the facility, making announcements in different forums and through personal communication.

An effective and popular tool used in marketing, as well as social marketing, is “market segmentation”. Market segmentation ensures that the marketing efforts reach all members of a heterogeneous group. Segmentation includes identifying segments of the group and tailoring product, price, place and promotion to needs specific to each segment.

SEGMENTATION OF THE COMMUNITY

Segmentation consists of classifying individuals so that each person belongs to a unique group; further, groups are different from each other in some significant manner. Individuals in an organization can be segmented in several ways linked to diversity. In this regard, Bond and Pyle (1998) mention the shift from the old view in organizations that all workers are homogenous to a new view recognizing individual differences and diversity. Taking this view further, members of an organization can be segmented based on variables such as personal traits or demographic factors. Ely and Thomas (2001) take a different approach where they classify three perspectives towards diversity in the attitude of members, depending on how diversity was linked to group work and process. Thomas (1996) suggests segments determined by the levels of the organization. Finally, Kotler et al. (2002) mention a social marketing perspective of identifying segments by using a single, general purpose variable which indicates how far along a person is in the change processes (Kotler et al. 2002). While the variables suggested in literature may be applicable in certain situations, two variables that are quite different from these were found to be most effective for planning diversity events. Interestingly, these variables are not demographic descriptors or the usual diversity identifiers.

Each of these two variables has two values – high and low. As shown in Diagram 1, four segments are created by considering all combinations of these values. Each segment is described below.



The first variable is the degree to which individuals perceive themselves to be “diverse” or different. This could be based on race, ethnicity, socio-economic circumstances, or any other. The second variable is the degree to which an individual voluntarily participates in the organization’s diversity efforts. It is important to note that the two variables are independent of each other. Although it seems logical and reasonable that individuals who have a self-perception of being diverse, or different from the norm, would participate to a higher degree in diversity efforts, that is not necessarily so in practice.

DESCRIPTION OF SEGMENTS

Each segment can be described, in broad terms, as follows:

Segment A

This segment consists of individuals who perceive themselves to be sufficiently diverse in some manner but do not participate much in the organization’s diversity efforts. For instance, Finders and Lewis (1994) relate situations where parents that the school expected and wanted to participate in diversity efforts, did not. The reasons cited included (lack of) time, negative school experiences and fears of many kinds. In general, behavior of this segment could be driven by cultural, social, practical or personal reasons. In certain cultures there is a great reluctance to question authority, similar to “power distance” as defined by Hofstede (1984). Due to this distance, the idea of an individual, with no clear authority or appointment, participating in the functioning and decision making of the organization is an unfamiliar and uncomfortable one. Reluctance to participate may also arise from the fact that an individual is from a racial or ethnic group that has been traditionally underprivileged in society. This leads to lack of confidence in the system and its power to influence change. Finally, some individuals simply have a high degree of natural reluctance to draw attention to themselves.

Segment B

This segment, which can be comparatively large, consists of individuals who do not perceive that they are “diverse” in any way. They may consider diversity issues to be specific to individuals rather than systemic. Although they actively participate in other organizational events, such as picnics or holiday parties, they are reluctant to do so in diversity efforts.

Segment C

The members of this segment also do not perceive themselves to be diverse. However, they have obvious empathy with those who do and try to adopt a broader and system oriented view. These individuals are generally supportive of formal organizational efforts and willing participants in the diversity program. The behavior of this segment often leads to confusion since their response is taken to be indicative of success. It is extrapolated to the larger community without realizing that they are a unique segment. When responses of members from other segments, particularly Segment B, are quite different, it leads to discouragement for those involved in organizing the diversity program.

Segment D

Members of this segment perceive themselves to be different from the norm in some significant way. They are willing to work with the organization and take on leadership roles in designing and implementing diversity programs. Members of this segment are often the voluntary component for planning diversity efforts. Like members of Segment C, they attempt to look at the broader context and urge policy and procedural changes. They are optimistic of achieving positive change through sustained effort.

Although members of a community are likely to be distributed over all four segments, specific membership in a particular segment can change over time. The most obvious reason is due to individuals leaving or joining the community. An individual can also move from one segment to another based on factors such as changes in personal or

professional life (such as more demanding jobs or health issues), maturing or altering of perspectives, or simply shifts in motivation and interest.

DIVERSITY NEEDS OF SEGMENTS

Events differ in how they address diversity; on this basis, they can be classified into four types - support, celebratory, educational and training. The segments identified in the previous section can be linked to events: this relationship is based on needs and responses of segments. A later section describes the comprehensive strategy that utilizes this link in planning and publicizing events.

Members of different segments have different diversity needs and expectations of the organization. Members in Segment A have a need to be welcomed into the community and be assured that they are a valued part of it. In general, the organization can assist in managing perceptions that others have of them and help them feel a sense of belonging. Segment B members, who do not perceive themselves to have any issues or needs related to diversity, are sometimes apprehensive of possible deep or fundamental changes in the organizational functioning based on diversity. They need to be given specific information and reassurance as well as a clear rationale for any changes that happen. Members of Segment C need little more than confidence in the organization's ability to handle diversity in a thoughtful and considered manner. Finally, Segment D members, who are usually drivers of the continuing diversity effort, need positive encouragement, trust and motivation. They respond well to a degree of autonomy in designing the program.

POSITIONING EVENTS FOR DIFFERENT SEGMENTS

Cox (2001) and Marzano (2003) both stress the importance of having good "communication" for success of the diversity effort. Publicity is a key component of the success of events. Following is a description of the general characteristics of events that each segment responds best to and point to ways to communicate information about them.

Segment A

Events that are presented as friendly and informal will get a good response from this segment. It is helpful to have facilitators at the events that are perceived to be empathetic. Events will be especially successful if there is a possibility of resulting future action. To get members to participate may sometimes take effort. While general announcements draw some, others may only respond to personal appeals.

Segment B

Members of this segment respond best to events that are presented as "enjoyable" and "fun". Events that reinforce everyday experiences and are reassuring through their familiarity, while presenting something new and novel, are well received. Members of this segment often respond enthusiastically to these events and may even help in actual organization. A general-purpose and widely circulated announcement emphasizing the enjoyable aspects of the event is sufficient.

Segment C

Events that are presented as dealing with issues in an analytical, ideas based, and scholarly fashion, are well received by this segment. General announcements emphasizing the educational content will draw this segment, particularly if there is reading or other material available for advance preparation.

Segment D

The motivation for this group to respond to all types of events is complex – ranging from wanting to learn more, to be supportive of others and to enjoy but also a sense of obligation to support organizational efforts. Special

events will be valued by this category, as for example, when a diversity expert provides training on becoming effective facilitators.

RESPONSE OF SEGMENTS TO EVENTS

Described below are four types of events and their links to the four diversity related segments of the community.

Support Events

These are events, or more appropriately occasions, when individuals meet primarily to share experiences, feelings and opinions and to build social connections. These events may be arranged around topics or issues, or may be unstructured. Events such as get-togethers and meetings of formal or informal support groups fall in this category. Participation in these events calls for a willingness to share what may be personal and sometimes painful experiences.

Celebratory Events

Sometimes critiqued as “the cafeteria approach”, such events focus on aspects of diversity that can be shared easily with the larger community. For example, Rice and Sookdeo (1994) refer to a “Diversity Day” held at IBM’s System Storage Division in San Jose during which employees dressed up in ethnic clothes and shared special foods. Similarly, Ellis and Sonnenfeld (1994) describe a “Polish Day” during which employees could participate in that culture by way of food and entertainment. Events such as food festivals, “days” assigned to a specific culture and dance or music festivals fall in this category. Participation in such events rarely demands more than time commitment. While there may not be much that is new for anybody, it is a time for the community to connect and enjoy together.

Educational Events

Events such as book discussions, expert speakers and panelists seek to educate the community on different aspects of diversity. For instance, Ellis and Sonnenfeld (1994) describe an organization where managers used “valuing diversity” videos for group viewing and discussion; these qualify as educational events. Thomas (1996) describes different educational events, classified as “awareness”, “buy-in” and “broad-base rollout”, aimed at different groups in the organization. Educational events, as the name suggests, seek primarily to educate. They attempt to frame issues by placing them in the broader context of society or history. Participation in these events can call for preparation (reading a book), a degree of self-examination and willingness to (at least) consider change.

Training Events

Events can be designed to impart specific skills or knowledge related to diversity and its management. Sometimes this happens, without planning, as an organic part of the functioning of certain groups. Training could be discussions and directions on how to address a type of diversity, exercises in identity formation or suggestions on how to run diversity groups. Usually, although not always, organizations mandate members to participate in training programs. As a matter of comparison, Ellis and Sonnenfeld (1994) describe diversity related training programs at two different organizations, “NTS” where it was mandatory and “GCI” where it was not, with very different outcomes. In general, successful participation in these events requires a deep level of commitment to the diversity effort and willingness to learn and change. Training has been a method chosen by organizations as a significant part of the diversity program.

The above classification of events is broad; it is possible that some events do not fit neatly into one of these categories and can be of a “mixed” type.

Participation of a specific individual in a specific event is difficult to predict. It could be influenced by a variety of factors, ranging from work demands, sickness, family schedules, or simply interest in the subject. However, group behaviors are more predictable and follow broad patterns. A key observation that helps in understanding group

behaviour is the link between different types of events and different segments. Specifically, members of segment A are most likely to respond well to support events, segment B to celebratory ones and segment C members most enthusiastically participate in educational events. Members of segment D, who are most likely part of the group that organizes these events, could respond well to all types of events, while being most receptive to training.

THE COMPREHENSIVE EVENT PLANNING STRATEGY

Based on the segmentation of the community and the link between events and segment responses, the comprehensive event planning strategy recommends offering all four types of events over the course of a planning period. It is an inclusive strategy that addresses diversity needs of all parts of the community.

Offering primarily one type of event, although it builds learning and expertise of a certain kind, has significant drawbacks. For instance, celebratory type events typically have large and enthusiastic response. However, repeatedly offering only celebratory events can be perceived as “diversity lite” and a dilution of the commitment to examine and possibly change, which could lead to parts of the community discrediting the diversity effort. Offering educational events would remove some of that criticism: these events are also easier to organize and could draw a steady response with a high rate of repeat participants. However, offering only educational events will be perceived as elitist and ignoring the realities that affect some people intensely. An exclusive focus on support type events can be perceived as focusing on “problems” without offering constructive ways for the entire community to move forward. Finally, although training programs could be very effective in terms of participants picking up skills and gaining a sense of accomplishment, they require higher commitment and consequently participation levels will typically be low. With a strong training focus, the diversity effort may soon involve a small group of experts who have little or no impact on the rest of the community. Thus, focusing on only one type of event, or ignoring one type entirely, both alienate segments of the community.

A comprehensive strategy presents its own challenges. This strategy typically increases the sheer number of events held over a planning period. In addition, expertise built in holding a particular type of event does not translate to other types, thus making the learning curve slower in one sense. For instance, a support type event, which is open-ended and requires a high level of facilitator skills, is very different from an educational event, which is usually a structured discussion with a prepared format and content. Thus, an inclusive and all-encompassing strategy is vulnerable to the criticism that resources and effort are spread too thin, with breadth but not much depth. Organizations have to balance this drawback against the obvious benefits of engaging the entire community and avoiding the pitfalls of the diversity efforts being marginalized.

The most important benefit of the comprehensive strategy is that no part of the community is isolated from the diversity effort. By identifying what part of the program each segment best responds to, the strategy aims to maximize participation by planning and promoting events customized to segments’ needs. The strategy can be used even as types of diversity change; the only change to be made would be in the content or topics addressed in different events.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Diversity, what it means and how to achieve its full potential, is a vast and complex challenge that organizations struggle to meet. Mandatory programs have a definite role to play in diversity efforts. However, they lead to mixed results, thereby illustrating the importance of programs where participation is voluntary.

The comprehensive event planning strategy addresses the issues of managing voluntary participation in diversity events. It has been successfully implemented at an independent school in a major metropolitan area for several years. Over this time period, the author has held positions as a founder and co-chair of the diversity committee, a school board member at this school, and co-chair of a multi-school network of diversity committees. The author initially presented the strategy to the Head of School and the Admissions Director, the school’s appointed “Diversity Person”, when a formal diversity group was formed. The diversity group followed the broad format of the strategy almost from its inception. The first few years were a learning period for the school in terms of organizing and holding

events oriented to parents and families. Some events met with enthusiastic response, others with resistance and criticism from the community. Yet other events brought to surface simmering issues in the community which had no other platform for expression.

The school experience illustrated inherent challenges of diversity programs. Independent schools in general function in ways similar to business organizations. Thus, the experiences and approach can translate well in both educational as well as more general organizational settings. Organizations often spend considerable resources on diversity related events. Understanding how segments respond helps in planning and marketing of events. Since community members do pay a “price” which includes their time, and sometimes change of their beliefs, attitudes and behaviors, they need to be convinced that it is worth it for them to do so. It is thus worth the time for an organization to plan a long-term and comprehensive strategy so that events both attract individuals as well as benefit them; this will, in turn, benefit the organization.

As with almost all aspects of organizational change, diversity programs will be successful only if top management is involved (Cox 2001, GAO 2005, Rice and Sookdeo 1994). Assigning an administrative person the responsibility to coordinate and implement the voluntary efforts is likely to be extremely effective. An example of this approach is the assignment of “diversity managers” in Altman Weil (2006). Event planning and management too requires some involvement at higher management levels. Some critical decisions with regard to planning an event are – what it should be about, who should be the participants (or target audience), how it should be organized and when it should be held. It is important for top-level management to be involved in making decisions with regard to “what” and “who”. Other decisions such as when, where and how are more routine and can be made competently by assigned committees or individuals.

In future work, the comprehensive strategy can be expanded to include the more advanced elements of social marketing programs. These include developing segment leaders and measuring the impact of events. Segment leaders are individuals who influence other members in their segment to participate, either implicitly through their own involvement or explicitly by urging them to do so. Regarding the measurement of impact, it should be noted that the entire area of diversity management does not lend itself to easy quantification and subsequent development of success and accountability measures. However, instruments such as surveys could be used to get some information about the impact of events. A quantitative survey could reveal actual distribution of members among different segments. Surveys could also be used to measure both intra- and inter- organizational changes in diversity. Other avenues to explore are the nature of voluntary participation in diversity programs in organizations and cross-organizational learning and benchmarking of diversity efforts.

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