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Spreading awareness and gaining donor support for UNI Dance Marathon

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SPREADING AWARENESS AND GAINING DONOR SUPPORT
FOR UNI DANCE MARATHON

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Designation
University Honors with Distinction

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This Study by: Hannah Dash

Entitled: Spreading Awareness and Gaining Donor Support for UNI Dance Marathon

has been approved as meeting the thesis or project requirement for the Designation
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Date

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INTRODUCTION

The University of Northern Iowa's Dance Marathon (UNI DM) is an organization on campus that financially and emotionally supports children and families battling life-threatening illnesses and injuries. Participants raise money throughout the year for the University of Iowa Stead Family Children's Hospital (UI Stead Hospital), and the money is put toward something at the hospital that improves the level of care able to be offered. UNI DM also hosts numerous events during the year, including the Big Event to celebrate the year's accomplishments and celebrate the miracle families, which are families who voluntarily join during or after the treatment of their children at the UI Stead Hospital. The children who have been diagnosed with a life-threatening illness or injury are referred to as "miracle kiddos", to signify their courageous fight.

I have been involved with this organization for four years and it has given me a true purpose in life. I started as a committee member, then became an Assistant Director, and now serve as a Director, all in the Family Relations side. My involvement has helped me grow so close to the cause, and I have been able to see firsthand what our efforts do for the lives of our families. Throughout my time in UNI DM, I have also been exposed to areas of our organization that can be improved. We have found it difficult to obtain adequate participation due to a lack of interest from students in joining, which has made fundraising quite a struggle due to the lower number of members. I know that our program has much more potential than what has been reached in the past few years.

Motivation

The passion I have for this organization and the desire to help our miracle families is the primary motivation for this study. A need has been realized for immense improvement in regard

to mission outreach, as well as donor attraction, appreciation, and retention. Since UNI DM and the UI Stead Hospital served as the focus throughout this project, it is important to include the basic information of each.

The *UNI Dance Marathon* website includes anything that would need to be known about the organization such as the mission, miracle families, involvement, how to register, how to donate, and other fun facts. There is also contact information for the leadership board if there are any additional questions.

The *University of Iowa Stead Family Children's Hospital* website has basic information as well as the services it provides, news articles, and how to make an appointment. It also includes links for making donations and sharing a personal story about experience at the hospital.

Children's Miracle Network (CMN) is the nonprofit organization that Dance Marathon programs fall under. The CMN website shows the mission of the organization, personal stories, corporate partners, information on how to help, and other resources that allow for an overall understanding of the cause.

These websites are important for introducing the specific nonprofit organization that this project was centered around, and they are resources for those who would like to pursue further information on UNI DM, the UI Stead Hospital, and CMN. The links to each website are provided at the end of the thesis.

Before diving into the details of this study, I will introduce two of the children that are part of our UNI DM family: Beau (left) and Josie (right). Beau recently joined our program in the summer of 2021, and he just celebrated his first birthday on October 30th, 2021. Earlier in the year he was diagnosed with Fibrosarcoma which is a type of cancer. Josie is seven years old, and she has been a part of our program for many years. She was diagnosed with Hypoxic Ischemic

Encephalopathy of a Newborn which means her brain did not receive enough blood and oxygen when she was born.



The efforts of the UI Stead Hospital have given both of these children happy and healthy lives, along with many others. They are doing well, enjoying life, and they only receive routine scans and checkups as of now. These stories offer insight on the impact the UI Stead Hospital has made for the lives of so many children, and how important it is for UNI DM to support the hospital and our families.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to discover new ways to spread awareness of UNI DM in order to increase support for children and families connected to the local CMN hospital - The UI Stead Hospital. The project explored how nonprofit organizations effectively teach others about their missions, as well as fundraising efforts that contribute to a donor's decision on if and where to give donations. This new information will help UNI DM discover new and improved ways to expand knowledge of the cause and increase donor participation, which will enhance the financial and emotional support that the organization offers to families connected to the UI Stead Hospital. The goal of this study was to make suggestions for changes in regard to spreading

knowledge of the mission and improving fundraising efforts, and therefore enhancing participation in all areas of the organization.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Fundraising

The ability to raise funds for a cause is essential for any nonprofit organization. When relationships are pursued with current and potential donors, larger and more frequent donations result in addition to an improved experience for donors (Nelson and Shaker). These relationships build commitment, trust, and personal values between the donor and the organization, strongly correlating to the decision to donate (Bennett). There is also an increase in contributions when donations of others are visibly shown to those who are considering making a donation (Bennett).

Social media is a proven way to increase the success of fundraising. Social networks lead to a positive impact with the presence of more potential donors, and there are many more people who can be reached out to about donating (Priante, et al.). This communication channel allows for collaboration between fundraisers due to the higher social capital and larger networks, leading to improved fundraising compared to individuals (Priante, et al.).

Priante, et al. conducted a study to assess the relationship between social media and fundraising, and they found positive effects on donations for fundraisers who had high Twitter activity and more experience with the campaign. Holding a leadership role and using external fundraising links were also proven to be successful in the study (Priante, et al.). Based on the findings from their study, Priante, et al. were able to offer suggestions to nonprofit organizations in their fundraising efforts. They recommend forming groups of fundraisers and teaching individuals how to build connections with both donors and other fundraisers in order to display a

community effort (Priante, et al.) They also suggest handing out fundraising kits and developing skills to manage the communication on their social media networks (Priante, et al.).

Mission Outreach

In order to attract donations, nonprofit organizations must effectively inform many networks about their mission. Partnering with businesses allows for a mutual benefit since the nonprofit gains a valuable connection, and the business improves their image by supporting a noble cause (“Form Cause Marketing Partnerships”). Successful trends have been identified in cause marketing such as content marketing and storytelling, peer-to-peer programming, and point of sale and register roundups (“Form Cause Marketing Partnerships”). Each of these allow for a community effort and inspiration of the mission through the emotional impact that is exposed.

The use of social media has also been successful in the expansion of mission awareness. Organizations are able to reach many more people when they make the same post at multiple times throughout the day and when they include videos in the post (“Use Social Media”). This allows viewers to be engaged, and the organization can then reflect on the success and popularity of their posts (“Use Social Media”). Nonprofits should capture personal stories for use in videos or campaigns in order to inspire the viewers on the cause (Hundshamer). This will allow for stronger relationships between the organization and its peers, as well as exposure to the energy and passion that members of the organization hold (Hundshamer).

In addition to social media, other types of interaction with audiences should be considered (Hundshamer). This could include television, mobile phone advertising, and any other communication medium (Sidibe). The marketing decisions and advertising mediums are

key to the success of a nonprofit (Bennett), as it is the best way to engage others with the mission and encourage them to become involved (Sidibe).

The existing literature does not provide complete support for the purpose of the study, and there is no knowledge of this exact research previously being done. Therefore, further investigation was needed to meet the goal of increasing awareness and donor support for UNI DM.

RESEARCH METHODS

To explore new ways of spreading awareness about UNI DM and the UI Stead Hospital, as well as improving donor relations, interviews were chosen as the form of data collection. Multiple people were interviewed, and they offered contributions of both personal and professional experience. This study focused on the following research questions: 1. Are there certain criteria that nonprofit organizations' donors look for before giving? 2. What impacts donors' decisions on whether to donate, and to which organizations? 3. What are some ways for a nonprofit organization to increase awareness to the larger public?

The interviewees were chosen based on their connection to UNI DM and their accessibility to the researcher. One representative from the UI Stead Hospital (IP1), two executive board members of UNI DM (IP2 & IP3), and one donor (IP4) participated in the study. The proper approval to work with human subjects was obtained through the UNI Institutional Review Board before reaching out to these participants, and each participant was introduced to the study through an email. They were informed of the purpose of the research, the involvement being asked of them, and the confidentiality of their responses through a proper consent form that was included in the initial email. Once they agreed to participate in the study, an in-person

or virtual interview was scheduled and contributions were recorded for each participant, which will be disposed of at the completion of this study. The initial interview questions asked were:

- What has impacted your decision on whether or not to donate to a nonprofit?
(Donor)
- How did you find out about donating to a nonprofit? (Donor)
- Were you given sufficient appreciation for donating? (Donor)
- What are some ways to attract donors? (Hospital Representative)
- Do you have any fundraising tips? (Hospital Representative, UNI DM Members)
- What are some ways to honor donors? (Hospital Representative)
- What do you feel is most important in maintaining a nonprofit? (Hospital Representative)
- What are some other ways to involve people who aren't able to donate? (Hospital Representative, UNI DM Members)
- Do you have any suggestions on how to spread the word about UNI Dance Marathon? (UNI DM Members)

Each interviewee was able to fulfill their commitment by attending the interview and answering the questions that were asked of them, and their responses have been compiled to develop a condensed recommendation for UNI DM.

RESULTS

Donor Relations

One of the major themes that was present from the interview findings was the importance of relationships with donors. These relationships include three distinct stages: attraction, appreciation, and retention.

Attraction

Donor attraction is how an organization draws people into the mission and persuades them to donate; this is the first step for increasing monetary participation. From the interviews, it was learned that most people are interested in supporting a nonprofit, but they just need to be asked. The act of simply reaching out to someone can be the key difference between receiving a donation and not, since many people might be unaware that the organization exists until asked (IP1). Potential donors can be reached through multiple mediums such as mail, email, social media, flyers in public places, and in-person contact (IP4). Each of these communication tools are an effective way to reach many people. When talking to a potential donor, it is important to be personal and intentional in the conversation. This can be done by sharing the “why”, or the reason for being involved with the organization, and making sure that the mission of the organization is clear (IP1, IP2, IP3). This makes the potential donor feel like they are being cared for and it develops a deeper connection between the potential donor and the nonprofit. Learning someone’s “why” also helps the potential donor understand what is truly being fought for and the cause will likely resonate, making it more likely that a donation will be made (IP1, IP4).

Appreciation

When a donation is made to an organization, it is crucial to extend gratitude to whoever made the contribution to let the donor know of the difference that is being made in the lives of others. This can be done through a verbal or written “thank you” at the time of the donation, depending on the medium of contact with the donor (IP4). Historically, personal messages have been the best way to show appreciation to donors, and it will likely continue to be (IP1). In regard to corporate sponsors, it was learned that UNI DM should review the current sponsorship packet to see what larger donors are currently being offered for appreciation (IP1). Businesses have been large contributors to the fundraising total each year, so it is important to maintain those relationships. If there are other organizations or groups on UNI’s campus or in the community that have helped UNI DM, then members should be present at the events of those supporting groups to reciprocate support and build stronger relationships (IP1). Social media shoutouts and fundraising incentives are other effective ways to display gratitude to all groups of donors (IP1).

Retention

The final step in donor relations is the importance of maintaining relationships in future years. The best ways to encourage donors to continue making contributions are to extend appreciation, which was previously discussed, and keep them informed about what the organization is doing. The community and other donors can be invited to events, and a livestream or other virtual option can be offered to include individuals who live farther away (IP1). Social media and other communication tools can be utilized to share updates on the miracle families and anything that is going on within the organization. It was also learned that UNI DM should routinely share what the fundraising money is being used for as this offers

insight into the true importance of each donation (IP1). Keeping donors up to date will allow for a feeling of involvement as well as a chance to develop own connections to the cause of the organization.

Fundraising Ideas

Another key theme that was present in the interviews relates to the fundraising efforts of UNI DM and/or any nonprofit organization. This has been separated into general tips and specific ideas for fundraising that were offered by the interviewees.

General Tips

The interview participants offered general knowledge that UNI DM can keep in mind during fundraising efforts. It was reiterated that members should be encouraged and not afraid to ask for donations, and that communications should be made personal (IP1, IP2, IP3). Asking can be personalized by sharing “whys” and what the money is going toward, which have been previously discussed, as well as reaching out to people directly instead of just posting a fundraising link (IP2, IP3).

Specific Fundraising Ideas

Specific plans for fundraising were also offered, with one idea being a Hot Chocolate and Letter Writing Party (IP1). This would bring members together to enjoy hot chocolate and write letters to potential donors, as well as share success stories with each other on what has gone well for individual fundraising (IP1). Social media challenges can be held such as a 50 States challenge, where UNI DM would try and receive a donation from every single state within a given period of time (IP1). Members can do embarrassing things in exchange for donations such as cracking eggs on their head, posting funny pictures, and doing the Blazin’ Challenge at Buffalo Wild Wings (IP2, IP3). UNI DM can host gift card drawings where one donation leads

to one entry, and members can act as Uber drivers for their friends and family (IP2, IP3). These are all ways to make fundraising fun and engaging for potential donors, and encourage a community effort in raising money for the cause.

Cause Awareness

The final theme identified throughout the interviews was the importance of a nonprofit being able to effectively spread word of the cause. This includes general tips for spreading awareness, groups of people that UNI DM should connect with, and specific ideas for reaching the most people, as outlined below.

General Suggestions

The relationships that UNI DM have with donors as well as fundraising efforts are crucial to supporting the UI Stead Hospital and the miracle families, but this cannot happen without successfully spreading awareness of the mission. It was learned from the interviews that UNI DM's purpose, to help the UI Stead Hospital and families connected to it, needs to be at the center of all operations (IP1). Each member needs to identify a personal reason for being involved with the organization in order to share motivation with other people, and conversations need to be had with as many peers as possible to share the truth about what UNI DM does for the UI Stead Hospital and families (IP1). Multiple communication channels can be used to ensure that each generation is being reached, such as social media, newspapers, magazines, fliers, and sidewalk chalk around UNI's campus and the community (IP2, IP3, IP4). UNI DM can use these methods to teach peers about specific things that have been done for the UI Stead Hospital and miracle families, which can show the true impact of the organization (IP1).

Connections to Other Groups of People

Three of the most important groups for UNI DM to collaborate with are the organization's alumni, faculty and staff, and nondonor populations (IP1). Alumni are a key connection because they have been involved with UNI DM and have developed an understanding of the cause. Connections with miracle families have likely been maintained, and new networks of people exist that current members may not have the opportunity to reach. Improving alumni engagement by extending invitations to more events and keeping alumni up to date on everything the organization is doing was a valuable suggestion that was given in the interviews (IP1).

UNI's staff and faculty are other crucial relationships that UNI DM members need to establish. Staff and faculty can be included in the cause by having members reach out to them and teaching the staff and faculty about the mission. Faculty can be asked to share a video or family story at the beginning of class, add a slide about UNI DM to the presentation for the day, or allow a member to speak to the class for a few minutes to help students understand what UNI DM is all about (IP1). Both staff and faculty can be encouraged to wear orange for Tangerine Thursdays and share knowledge of the organization to their own peers. Some of the UNI DM members have started involving faculty and staff, and it will be intriguing to see the outcome of these efforts.

UNI DM has recognized that a monetary donation is not feasible for everyone and wants to make sure to offer other ways for people to be involved. It was recommended for the organization to invite the community to events that are being hosted, and to offer a virtual option for individuals who are unable to attend in person (IP1). UNI DM can create opportunities for people to volunteer, such as opening preparation of events throughout the year to nonmembers of

the organization (IP2). UNI DM members can also encourage both donors and nondonors to share information about the organization with their peers to reach beyond individual networks (IP1, IP2, IP3).

A Specific Outreach Idea

One of the main suggestions for improving cause awareness was hosting a “Stead Talk” at UNI (IP1). This event would be held at a popular location on campus, and it could involve UNI DM members, miracle families, alumni, UNI faculty and staff, and UI Stead Hospital employees. Each group could publicly share connections to UNI DM and the UI Stead Hospital, and the impact each has had on their lives. This would allow for many people to hear about the purpose of the organization while passing through, even if they don’t stop to actively listen (IP1).

Final Connections

The information discussed in relation to the interviews conducted was not exhaustive, as some of the findings were left out due to irrelevance in answering the research questions. However, the contributions from the interview participants did allow for the purpose to be met through the suggestions on how UNI DM can spread awareness and gain donor support. It was learned that mission outreach can be expanded through sharing personal motivations, utilizing multiple communication channels, collaborating with multiple populations, and creating opportunities for the community to be involved with the organization. Fundraising efforts and relationships with donors can be strengthened through personal interactions, acts of appreciation, continuous updates of organizational operations, and use of specific fundraising activities.

SUGGESTIONS FOR UNI DANCE MARATHON

Based on all of the findings from the interviews, areas of focus were identified that UNI DM can realistically pursue in the coming months.

Surveys

To improve the organization overall, separate surveys can be sent out to those who are loyal members and to those who have stepped away. The surveys will ask questions about what has caused people to stay involved and what has caused them to leave, which will provide valuable insight for UNI DM on how past and current participants feel about experiences (IP1). The surveys can be implemented at any time, and they will likely take place via an online platform to reach as many people as quickly as possible. The names of current and past participants can be pulled from UNI DM's donor drive database, as well as contact information for sending the survey (IP1).

Inspiration

In order to increase participation among donors, members, and the community, UNI DM should find ways to inspire these groups. This can be done by publicly sharing "whys", personal stories from families, and the specific destination of the funds that are being raised. Hosting a Stead Talk could be a great way to influence nonmembers and motivate them to join the organization. Based on past experience, UNI DM instills motivation in the members who have personally connected with miracle families, so the organization can allow for this interaction as often as possible.

Faculty & Staff Involvement

UNI DM members can easily reach out to faculty and staff that relationships have been built with. This can be done through an email or an in-person conversation. Members would

teach the faculty and staff about the organization, and the faculty and staff would decide how involved they would like to be. Faculty and staff could wear orange to support Tangerine Thursdays, introduce UNI DM to classes, and spread knowledge of the cause to their own networks. UNI DM would also need to keep a record of each connection that is formed so the relationships can be continued in future years with new members (IP1).

Community Engagement

Finding ways to involve more of the community will be crucial in the short- and long-term futures. People in the Cedar Valley and beyond can be invited to UNI DM's events and a virtual option can be offered. Members can ask for help from the community when preparing for events throughout the year, and the public can be updated through platforms such as newspapers, flyers, and magazines that extend past social media. Individual members can encourage friends and family to share the fundraising pages as well as information on the organization with people in their own networks. UNI DM can also extend volunteer efforts to other businesses in the community to spread awareness and help even more people at the same time.

Fundraising

One of the most important aspects of UNI DM is the fundraising efforts of participants. Raising money for the UI Stead Hospital is a key reason for existence, and the total raised at the end of each year determines what is able to be funded at the hospital in support of the children and families being treated. The emotional support that is offered to families is the true priority for UNI DM, but the organization's success is also determined by the amount of money raised for the UI Stead Hospital. In the past, UNI DM's donors have funded a pediatric helicopter, a library in the hospital, and research for Pediatric Epilepsy. Projects funded by UNI DM have truly helped families, and many of the tips and ideas that were offered in this study can allow

UNI DM to continue funding important projects at the UI Stead Hospital. The organization can reach out to people directly, make their fundraising asks personal, do embarrassing things in exchange for donations, host a gift card drawing, and serve as an Uber driver. UNI DM should also consider hosting a Letter Writing Party to encourage the personal effort that is needed for fundraising and to allow for interaction between participants.

CONCLUSION

This study allowed for a deeper look into the operations of UNI DM and how support can be enhanced for miracle families through increased cause awareness and monetary contributions. Ideas for enhancement in key areas of the organization were generated in regard to donor relations, fundraising, and cause awareness. The goal was to discover new methods for UNI DM to pursue for spreading cause-awareness on a greater scale, increasing participation on and off campus, and generating greater fundraising. The findings from this project have provided new perspectives and resources that UNI DM can use to improve efforts, which will allow for greater support for the miracle families and the UI Stead Hospital.

Even though this study focused on helping UNI DM, there is hope that these findings will help other Dance Marathon programs, the UI Stead Hospital, and even other nonprofit organizations as well. The results of the interviews exposed fundamental operations that are important for any organization, and a lot of lives can be positively impacted by ensuring success in the areas that have been discussed.

There were some limitations present since it was only feasible to interview a small selection of people, and each of them were located in Iowa. Inclusion of Dance Marathon programs from other areas across the country were not included in this study, but that could be an impactful path for further research. It was not possible to review an exhaustive list of current

literature, which means other studies and opinions that exist on the topic were not considered, and this could be another factor to pursue if further research is conducted. In addition, the interview participants were not given the questions ahead of time to ensure authenticity, which means there could be further insight that was not brought to light in this research. The most obvious limitation that was not discussed in this study would be the effects that COVID-19 has had on everyone's lives over the past two years. The pandemic has deprived people of social interaction and normal routine, which is likely a contributing factor in the lack of participation that UNI DM has experienced.

Despite the circumstances around them, children are going to continue getting sick. The families that UNI DM fights for cannot wait for the pandemic to be over, and no other choice exists but to fight every single day because the lives of children depend on it. It is up to the rest of our communities to fight alongside families and help their children achieve the normal childhood that they deserve. The purpose of UNI DM is to provide support to our families through battles in the toughest journeys that anyone could face, and the organization has to recognize our areas of improvement in order to do that. Children deserve to be children instead of worrying about their health, and I want to do everything in my power to help the organization I love succeed in helping our miracle families. I hope the findings from this study will improve success for UNI DM, and that the organization will be able to offer the best support possible to the UI Stead Hospital, families, and children who need chances to reach their futures.

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