UW-Stevens Point PRSSA

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The Difference Between Community Engagement and Community Outreach

Many people assume Community Engagement and Community Outreach are interchangeable phrases and many organizations even have their Community Engagement and Outreach positions combined into one person. There is a difference in the words, and what is important for an organization is that they find ways to include both in to their business models to effectively relate to a community.

Community Outreach:

Most organizations have some sort of an outreach program. Outreach is very often a side of marketing. For example, say a business finds room in their budget to offer coupons, and then hands them out along with pamphlets at the Farmer's Market downtown. That would be an outreach effort- trying to reach more of the community that you already don't by extending your message.

Outreach can be an amazing resource for marketing within the community, but the issue is that often the community is seen as an external resource. The organization may seem to be simply trying to reach more consumers and building relationships may be lost in the process.

This isn't saying outreach is a bad thing. There are still a lot of great things outreach can accomplish for an organization. For example, if it's trying to grow an audience base after a

big plan has been announced or renovations are being done, getting the message out to the community is very important for support.

The most important aspect of outreach is keeping communication in the community. The values and issues of the people need to be prevalent in all organization discussions if you want support. To make the organization important in the community, clear and parallel business values with community values is a great starting point for building discussions and relationships.

Community Engagement:

Instead of reaching out to the community, engagement is about working with relationships in the community to change and grow the entire organization. It focuses on maintaining connections with the broader community and involving all areas such as geographic, economic, demographic, cultural, etc.

Building relationships not only helps the organization but can also connect citizens to each other in ways previously not known.

Below are some strategies for engagement. This is not a list for every way you can reach out to community members, and while all may not be applicable for every organization, incorporating some can enhance community relations in large ways.

Create Inclusive Events:

If an organization does events, these need to target different audiences and welcome all people. These events should be culturally diverse and sensitive. The planning and programming of the event should involve the people you hope to target.

These events should also include all ages and genders. This should go without explanation, but making sure every member of a family can come to an event increases people's want to attend.

Also, these events should reach every economic level of people. Maybe some nights can be free or discounted for those who can't afford to spend money on entertainment or other events.

Include Community Leaders:

In the hope for inclusiveness, it is important to develop relationships with community leaders. These leaders may be the obvious ones such as the city mayor, editor of a newspaper, school principals/superintendents, but more importantly are those that aren't as obvious. These people may be leaders of service organizations, cultural organizations, or neighborhood coalitions.

Reaching out to more leaders of the community gets more members involved and they will most likely bring more of your target audience to the event or to help plan it. The ideas that these leaders will bring to your business will open your eyes to what your community can accomplish.

Encourage Discussion:

Another aspect is creating open discussions. Creating a space for trust and communication is always a great way to make a reputation, and keep people coming back.

With our world constantly evolving and social issues being brought up more often, it is so important recognize the injustice, and then create a safe place for discussion and understanding for your customers, but also among local leaders.

Also, when planning, incorporating community ideas gives members a sense of belonging and that they can contribute to the organization. This is another important area of discussions.

Again, creating connection can lead to interdependence, and that kind of relationship can move a community forward.

In our ever-developing world, finding ways to increase community engagement also discovers ways to connect people that no other strategies can. Beginning with outreach is often a great way to incorporate engagement into a business. Getting your message heard is usually the first step of getting people interested, and then getting people's engagement.
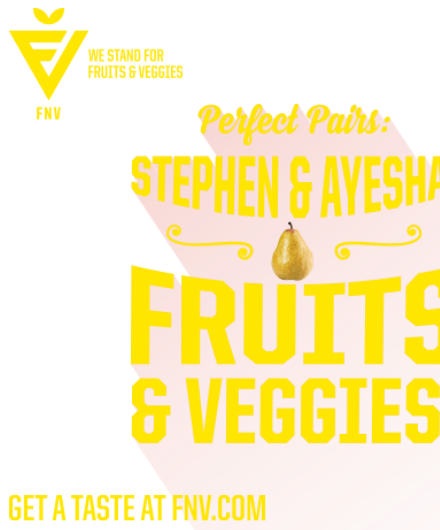
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