

Young Professionals of Wichita Falls: Consulting Project to Build a Sustainable Future

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Young Professionals of Wichita Falls (YPWF) was a non-profit organization established in 2012 with over 100 members. By 2017 the membership had declined to 62. The organization wanted to ascertain the reasons for this decline. The authors embarked on a consulting project with the aim of assisting YPWF to attract and retain members. We conducted a qualitative study and interviewed 12 stakeholders. The major obstacle discovered was a lack of clarity regarding the organization's purpose. Grounded in the data analysis of the interviews with key stakeholders, we created an identity focus for the organization based on a trifecta of goals: social networking, professional networking and civic involvement. We also made recommendations of the activities YPWF should undertake to attract new members. The suggestions were presented to YPWF in Spring 2017. The board utilized some of these suggestions in an eventual merger with the city's chamber of commerce in 2020.

Keywords: case study, volunteer motivation

INTRODUCTION

Young Professionals of Wichita Falls (YPWF) in Texas was a non-profit organization established in 2012 with over 100 members. By 2017, the membership had declined to 62 members. Due to the decline

in memberships, the then president of YPWF approached the researchers of this study for consultation to ascertain the reasons for this drastic decline and the obstacles in growing membership. Upon understanding the president's consultation needs, we sought to answer the following research questions qualitatively:

1. Why is YPWF losing members?
2. How can YPWF attract new members and retain current ones?

Before presenting the case findings, we first provided a brief review of the relevant literature. This is followed by a discussion of the methods used to answer the research questions. Next, we present the findings and recommendations made to YPWF. The final section provides a brief discussion about the findings and the concluding remarks of this study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

To understand what motivates individuals who volunteer their time, we looked to the literature on intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Ryan and Deci (2000, 2003) defined intrinsic motivation as the doing of an activity because it is interesting and for its inherent satisfactions rather than some separable consequence. Therefore, according to their definition, an intrinsically motivated person engages in an act because of the fun or challenge it poses to them rather than because of external pressures or rewards. On the other hand, extrinsic motivation means doing an activity to attain a separable outcome such as tangible or verbal rewards. Thus, satisfaction is not from the activity itself, but from the consequences to which the activity leads (Ryan and Deci, 2003). Sometimes extrinsic motivation can counteract intrinsic motivation. For example, Valentinov (2007) argues that intrinsic motivation plays a critical role in the survival of non-profit organizations, but it can be displaced by the use of extrinsic incentives, which he called the crowding-out effect. He built on Frey and Jegen's (2001) study, which found that crowding-out occurred when the volunteers viewed the rewards as controlling their behavior, subsequently decreasing their volunteering time. It is important to note that the crowding-out effect only occurs if an individual initially had found a task interesting and was originally intrinsically motivated to do it. Valentinov (2007) also states that the degree to which non-profit members are intrinsically motivated has a lot to do with whether the organization's mission reflects volunteers' values and beliefs. Thus, we theorized that YPWF could attract and retain members by ensuring members are intrinsically motivated to sustain the organization.

Although intrinsic motivation is a key factor, the literature on non-profit volunteer/member motivation demonstrates that extrinsic motivation also has an important role to play. In the same article discussing the crowding-out effect, Frey and Jegen (2001) also detail the crowding-in effect where individuals perceive external interventions to motivate an activity as supportive of their internal desires. Thus, the two kinds of motivations can work concurrently.

Thus, we further theorized that YPWF could offer opportunities to their members that are also extrinsically motivating, so long as they aren't the dominant reason for a member to join the organization, but rather a supporting one to enhance a member's perceived benefits of being in the organization. We acknowledge not every member of YPWF would be intrinsically motivated, thus the importance of giving perceivable rewards such as public acknowledgement and networking opportunities also has a role to play, and efforts to provide strategic extrinsic motivation should be pursued.

METHODS

We interviewed 12 key stakeholders, including past and present members and the head of the city's chamber of commerce. Each interview used the same set of questions and was recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using the Grounded Theory Methodology (Charmaz, 2006). Each interview lasted anywhere between 60 to 90 minutes. This was a labor-intensive process as we transcribed, coded, and cross-coded each interview resulting in an investment of over 300 hours in analyzing the 12 interviews. We entered the cross-coded interviews into the software Nvivo where we tracked for the emergent themes (codes) in the data.

We engaged in “open coding,” where we assigned broad open codes to sections of interview text and used a “constant comparative” process to analyze the data line-by-line and compare new data with old (Corbin and Strauss, 2008; Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Corbin and Strauss (2008) acknowledge that researchers have certain theoretical lenses and encourage the use of these lenses while coding, but they also encourage allowing for the possibility for other codes to emerge. Accordingly, we allowed our data to dictate the initial codes. The data inspired our codes, resulting in several categories of codes, some of which emerged from our theoretical lenses (such as intrinsic and extrinsic motivation) and others that were in-vivo codes (i.e., codes emerging from the data—such as obstacles to membership, recruiting challenges etc.). Since the same interview text could have elements of more than one open code, we allowed the text to be coded for multiple open codes.

To determine the relationship between our and the major codes, we followed Corbin and Strauss (2008) and performed axial coding throughout the coding process. While open coding parses data, axial coding attempts to bring it together and helps relate subcategories to categories (Charmaz, 2006). This analytic process simultaneously blends first-order analysis (which is reflective of the subjects’ views) and second-order analysis (which is reflective of researchers’ interpretations) and is consistent with other grounded theory research in management (e.g., Ashforth, Kreiner, Clark, and Fugate, 2007; Kreiner, Hollensbe, and Sheep, 2006; Suddaby, 2006). Throughout coding, we took notes about the new codes/changes; wrote theoretical memos (Charmaz, 2006) to document potential theoretical relationships between the categories; and updated the coding dictionary accordingly. The open coding led to 34 major categories with over 200 in Nvivo codes as subcategories. We then moved to what Charmaz (2006) refers to as “focused coding.” We focused on coding specifically to explain large segments of the data, using the most significant and frequently used codes (such as codes to do with obstacles or motivation) to sift through large amounts of data and generate our consulting suggestions. We believe we followed the guidelines laid out by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Suddaby (2006) on conducting trustworthy and credible qualitative research.

FINDINGS

One of the important findings was the lack of clarity for the identity, mission, and purpose of YPWF. We coded this obstacle to membership as “branding,” which addresses the idea of ‘who are we’ and ‘what are our goals’ as an organization? For example, one interviewee said in response to what they thought YPWF’s goal and the mission was: “I’m not sure there is one, to me it always seemed like a networking sort of organization more than anything else if there is a mission and vision, I don’t know what they are.” Indeed, even a board member shared this in his interview: “(at) the beginning of this year, we had a strategic planning meeting, and that was one of the things that came up. We went around the room (and asked)—‘Can anybody tell me what the mission statement is? Just off top of your head, what is our mission statement?’ Nobody can do it! We read it, waited two minutes—‘Can anybody now tell me what it is?’ Nobody could do it! Well, there’s the problem.”

Similarly, another interviewee said: “I know that right now is to cultivate (meaning develop) young professionals. But before a month ago, I did not know that. So, I was not aware of their mission or vision or what they were really trying to do.” Another commented: “I just never knew what the organization stood for or what we were supposed to accomplish.”

Seeming more certain of the identity of the organization, a board member stated the mission as: “to basically attract and retain young professionals is the nuts and bolts of it... our official mission statement is creating future leaders for Wichita falls... (but we changed it to) How do we keep somebody here and how do we keep top talent here? Get them plugged in with the right folks.” Other interviewees agreed but also claimed that it had morphed and changed over time. One interview, for example, said: “the original mission was to ... to attract and retain Young Professionals Wichita Falls and I think now (the)... mission has changed some because it does have an active following and I believe ... the community has ...used it as an outlet to get information out there ...to be a voice for certain causes in town... I think it has grown away from the attracting young professionals and retaining them to more so ... growing ... their skills.” Another said: “Initially we were just trying to get people in the organization, when you are starting an

organization like that it's hard to have a clear vision and figure out who you really are, and I think that took Young Professionals of Wichita Falls longer than it should have.”

Due to all the contradictory and uncertain responses, we concluded that the identity of this organization had been quite contested and unclear over the life of the organization till the time of the study. This lack of agreement seemed to be a major roadblock for the organization. To clarify the purpose and uncover what would motivate young professionals to join this organization, we believed that the qualitative methodology of asking questions and allowing themes to emerge from the data was particularly helpful. Had we assumed knowing the issue that was causing a decline in membership and consequently created a survey based on these assumptions, we would have perhaps missed this more fundamental issue of identity-branding as well as the emergent suggestions/motivations past and current members shared with us that they claimed would enable them to commit further to YPWF.

Another obstacle that we found regarding YPWF attracting and retaining members/volunteers was a lack of member engagement. Most members who had left or had reduced their involvement with YPWF claimed that they did so due to time constraints. For example, one board member lamented about the dwindling participation: “I asked a lot of people, and they always say they are too busy. That is the generic canned answer.” However, this same board member went on to say that they are other non-profits that she is involved with where there is a higher level of commitment: “In my other organization, people are more invested and committed. They want to see things get done.” This indicated that the claim of a lack of time might just be to cover a deeper issue that was causing dwindling interest and motivation. Based on other emerging codes such as ‘role overload’, we theorized that there might be more structural issues causing members to step back, such as a lack of role clarity or being overburdened, eventually leading to burnout. As an indication of this, when prompted to, an interviewee compared YPWF with another non-profit in town they were familiar with, which we will call HHH. They referenced the head of HHH as being someone who: “...delegates well. He really breaks it down and says—These are the 60 different elements that make up this event, make up what we do. YPWF needs to also break down the tasks such that people interested in and motivated to lead have the opportunity to do so without feeling the full pressure of being president and having this pressure to do everything. You can lead in a way you have the capacity to do so.”

Based on this finding, we made the consulting suggestion to the board that after first clarifying the organization's purpose and branding, they then also needed to have more effective strategies in place to avoid exhaustion/burnout from placing too many demands on the few motivated members. We suggested that they use the strategy of dividing the overall goal of the organization up into more achievable and focused units.

Based on our interviews with current and ex-members, we found that the three areas that most motivated individuals were: social networking, professional networking, and civic involvement. Thus, we suggested that the organization adopt this trifold focus as the central goals of YP and make the same clear through visual branding and organizational structure. We suggested a governance structure whereby there was an appointed chair for each division (social, professional, and civic), such that the chair focuses solely (or at least primarily) on the objectives of that division. Based on the literature review of volunteer motivation, we further recommended that the chair for each subdivision needs to be intrinsically motivated by the goal of that division. For example, the chair of the social networking division would ideally be extroverted, well-networked in the community, approachable, a good communicator, and if not inherently detail-oriented and organized, then would need to be supported by a person who is detail-oriented and good at organizing. The head of professional networking would ideally be very structured/organized, well-respected in the business community, and passionate about mentoring and growing young minds. The civic head would be someone who is community-minded, has a real love for volunteering, and has lots of past civic experience to enable collaborations between YPWF and other non-profits.

Social Networking

Data further suggested that the obstacle for social networking was member perception that there was: “Nothing to do in (this small town).” One interviewee said: “... (This small town) experiences tremendous brain drains ...students are going to complain... There's nothing to do here.” Another interviewee

maintained that YP's main purpose should be social networking: "Networking is the main thing. It's certainly social building. I think it wants to bring ties to the young people and the community that they live in... so that this isn't a place that experiences tremendous brain drain, and this sort of active culture that students are going to complain about doesn't exist here in town. There's nothing to do here."

Our consulting suggestion was that the social networking chair focuses on creating unique events. To assist with this goal, we gave them a list of over 30 events that they could host for members, including board game marathons, Nerf battles, cultural jam sessions, karaoke madness/Epic Intros, kickball leagues, etc. The idea was that YPWF should provide fun and unique opportunities for young people in this small town to connect with that would be hard for individual members to create/replicate for themselves in this town if they were not part of this organization.

Another obstacle for social networking was a lack of clear communication about social events. One interviewee said: "I remember they really pushed knocker ball and I didn't even know what knocker ball was until after it happened. And then, when I looked it up, I was like 'we should have gone to that and that would have been fun.'" Another interviewee recalled about a social networking event they had attended: "There was no program at all ... I didn't get the feeling that anyone was paying attention to the structure of the event and how it was going. No one was managing the conversation at all."

Yet another obstacle that emerged from the data regarding social networking was that existing members could sometimes behave like a tight clique and thus came across as unfriendly. For example, one interviewee said: "The people that knew each other seemed to get along great, but they were not as welcoming as they could be towards new people. There was one couple who also did not seem to know anybody that sat with us, and those were the only people we really talked to that whole night." Yet another obstacle with regards to social networking was the feeling that members kept seeing the same faces and were not meeting anyone new. One interviewee recalled: "...it was talking to a lot of the people who I already knew in the organization rather than getting to know new people." Thus, it seemed that at YPWF social networking events were failing at facilitating a smooth blending of new and old members in a structured way.

Further, towards the social networking goal, we also suggested that instead of waiting for young professionals in the area to find the organization on their own, YPWF needed to undertake a targeted membership drive at the organizations in town where young people were present in the largest numbers, namely the universities, the hospitals and healthcare industry, the hospitality industry, and the military base in town. Further, we suggested that YPWF restructure all social networking events in the following manner:

- Send clear communication and reminders for upcoming events (try and put them on a social calendar for YPWF a month in advance at least).
- Introduce new members as well as board members at the beginning of every event.
- Purposefully mix attendees into subgroups.
- Conduct an Icebreaker.
- Execute the main event.
- Follow-up with members on event experience via anonymous survey.

Professional Networking

With regards to professional development, one of the major obstacles was the feeling some of the original members had about feeling too old for the group based on current policy. We labeled this finding as the "obstacle—aged out." For example, an ex-member said in their interview: "... I've aged out... it's almost like a stigma of once you get a little bit older or even more established in your job it's like I don't need YPWF..." Fortunately, due to the qualitative methodology, another interview we did with a board member of YPWF referenced a potential solution to this age policy. This interviewee referenced another non-profit (Junior League) they volunteered for and said: "... after you have been there [Junior League] for a certain amount of time, you become what's called a founding member. I don't think they cut you off from a certain age unless you want to retire." This led to the consulting suggestion we made to YPWF to consider holding on to older members by graduating them to a special mentor level status. We further suggested that

the organization should consider adopting a mentorship model and prioritize the idea of receiving mentoring as one of the main benefits of joining YPWF.

We suggested that YPWF adopts a “Two-Level Mentorship Model.” Level 1 would be within the organization where older members (perhaps now labeled ‘founding members’), could actively mentor younger/newer members of YPWF. Level 2 would involve building collaborations between YPWF and the city’s Chamber of Commerce, such that current YPWF members could be mentored by Chamber of Commerce (CoC) members (business owners). We highlighted many potential benefits to both YP and CoC towards undertaking such a mentoring partnership program. Most obviously, many new members (potential mentees) would likely be (extrinsically) motivated to join YPWF due to the opportunity to get a mentor. On the other side of this coin, such a partnership would be a prestigious opportunity for potential mentors to share their implicit and explicit knowledge with a young person who would look to them for guidance. Mentorship allows for the mentor to be able to claim the extrinsic reward of providing focused community involvement. Also, the opportunity to be a mentor affords individuals the ability to have a following of younger minds who are potential resources to draw upon to further a mentor’s professional goals (which could also be extrinsic motivations). For example, a mentor can come to learn a mentees’ strengths and weaknesses via mentoring and thus be in a good position to potentially recruit that mentee or recommend the mentee for an opportunity to someone in their network. Mentees can also be a good source of positive word-of-mouth press for the mentor’s business/organization. Finally, mentoring also further increases the chances that YPWF members will find jobs in town and be motivated to stay, thereby reducing brain drain from the city (which is a goal for both YPWF and the city’s Chamber of Commerce). In sum, we believed that a mentoring partnership would create a perfect opportunity to grow membership due to a blend of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. Thus, the mentoring suggestion was our main consulting suggestion toward the organizational goal of strengthening professional development.

Civic Involvement

Finally, our qualitative findings revealed that many YPWF members were hoping to have more civic impact through their role in the organization than what they had been afforded thus far. Civic opportunities seemed to be either lacking completely or very rare. The organization had been more focused on social and professional networking. One interviewee, for example, said: “...at the end of the workday: am I going to serve dinner to people who don’t have a house versus am I going to play kickball? I’m not going to play kickball! I want to be involved (with an organization) if I feel like I’m spending my time getting a little more out of it versus just socializing.” Based on this and similar findings, we suggested that YPWF increases its efforts towards civic impact. We suggested that YPWF partner with a few other non-profit organizations that had a youth focus and create opportunities for YPWF members to help these other non-profits through less time-intensive volunteering opportunities (for example, in shifts where no member has to do more than 2-3 hours work). This would allow YPWF members to get involved with the community at various levels and allow members to donate their time to various non-profits in town without having to join that specific non-profit as a full-time volunteer expressly. For any member who was looking to enhance their resume by claiming to have worked with various non-profits (extrinsic motivation that an intrinsic motivation may fuel), this civic-volunteering partnership would allow for a breadth of experience without necessarily entailing a considerable time commitment from any individual member.

We also suggested that YPWF creates an annual signature fundraising event for a cause that profoundly affects the younger generation (for example, student loan debt or autism, or mental health challenges in a digital world). The logic behind the fundraiser was that the event could become intrinsically tied to the organization’s identity in an image-enhancing way. We suggested that such a fundraiser would likely create more legitimacy towards establishing YPWF as the voice for young professional people in the city. The awareness and legitimacy of YPWF as an organization might also increase for residents of the local community who would attend such an event. In addition, creating long-term relationships towards annual sponsorship from local businesses would be an opportunity for YPWF members to promote YPWF to the young people in those businesses and also cultivate cross-sponsorship prospects for professional and social networking. For example, YPWF may draw upon their relationship with these sponsoring businesses to get

good speakers for professional networking events. Alternatively, YPWF may also use venues of sponsoring businesses as the venue for social networking events.

Finally, we outlined a suggested timeline for YPWF to incorporate the consulting suggestions. We suggested that the immediate action necessary was to clarify branding/identity. We recommended that they immediately adopt a ‘Trifecta of goals: Social, Professional and Civic’ symbolism that was also represented visually across their posters, business cards, website, etc. This rebranding then needed to be accompanied by a concerted effort to create the three divisions with intrinsically motivated heads of division so that no one member is overwhelmed with trying to make headway in all three directions. We suggested that each head of a division plan at least four months ahead of time (rolling one month ahead at the end of each month) regarding upcoming events so that these can all be available to members on their website and through email, allowing members to plan ahead to attend events. Once these basic structural elements were in place, we suggested that YPWF undertakes a targeted membership drive in the aforementioned youth concentrated organizations in the city (universities, hospitals, military base etc.). We further suggested that the next agenda item should strategically partnering with the Chamber of Commerce towards creating a mentoring program. After these initial goals had been accomplished, only then should YPWF consider creating a signature youth-oriented fundraiser that would help establish the visibility and credibility of the organization in the local community.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The motivation of this study came from wanting to be helpful to a non-profit organization who approached us to help curb and reverse their declining membership. As researchers in management, we were familiar with motivation research and considered various ways we could have collected data that would help YPWF solve the membership problem. Had we gone in with just our preconceived notions based on theoretical orientations of what might be creating a lack of motivation, we would have likely missed out on key information that ultimately helped us uncover the fundamental underlying issue (i.e., a lack of clear identity and branding). This allowed us to start at the foundation of the problem and work our way up in terms of consulting suggestions that could help YPWF. We, as qualitative researchers, did not let our preconceived ideas based entirely on motivation theory dictate our consulting suggestions. Instead, we allowed our emergent data to ground and dictate the direction in which we focused our consulting suggestions, which, in turn, demonstrated the value of the qualitative approach. Our chief consulting suggestions to YPWF were to clarify their identity using the trifecta of professional networking, social networking, and civic involvement, which were the three main areas of interest as expressed by our interviewees. Further, we gave concrete suggestions on specific areas to focus on within each branch, such as suggestions around how to structure events, what events to try, and so on. We also strongly suggested a partnership with the Wichita Falls Chamber of Commerce to create a mentorship program that would be a key feature in attracting new members.

We are happy to report that a few months after making these suggestions to the board, YPWF ended up restructuring and joining forces with the Chamber of Commerce, with mentorship becoming one of the main goals of this merger. YPWF, as an independent entity, has ceased to exist, and a division of the Chamber of Commerce called The Circuit has replaced it. This is from the website of The Circuit: “In 2019, YPWF determined that it wanted to transition the focus of its organization from social interaction to professional, leadership, and community development. The Wichita Falls Chamber of Commerce helped YPWF restructure into the organization now known as The Circuit. Three Pillars: The Circuit is focused on developing emerging leaders through mentorship, community engagement, and personal growth.

1. Mentorship: Every member is matched to an industry expert mentor. This professional relationship is formed on confidence and allows for mentees to receive one-on-one advice and direction from a trusted resource.
2. Professional Development: The Circuit creates leaders. Circuit members are able to attend exclusive Chamber events such as BOSS, Wake Up Wichita Falls, Business After Hours, and exclusive Circuit programs to work continuously on professional (and personal) development.

3. Community Involvement: Circuit members will be actively engaged in Wichita Falls by attending and summarizing public meetings, called “Closed Circuits,” and participating in action teams to gather current events information on community-based initiatives, including Bike Wichita Falls, Lake Wichita, Intern Wichita Falls, Modern Schools, and Downtown Wichita Falls, called “Open Circuits.”

(Wichita Falls Chamber of Commerce, 2022)

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