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COMMERCIALIZING THERAPEUTIC RECREATION SERVICES

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ABSTRACT

The provision of recreation services to special populations traditionally has been offered in the institutional setting. With legislation, mainstreaming, and the advocacy movement, the practice of therapeutic recreation consultation emerged. Recently, the consultant has moved from employment in the not-for-profit sector into private practice, seeking the challenge, creativity, and responsibility not available in traditional settings. Extensive business and clinical skills are required to be successful as an entrepreneur. Credentials and credibility with referring personnel and other disciplines are necessary. Problems encountered and suggestions provided by therapeutic recreation entrepreneurs are presented.

COMMERCIALIZING THERAPEUTIC RECREATION SERVICES

INTRODUCTION

The provision of recreation services to special populations has long been the purpose of the therapeutic recreation profession. Hard-working, dedicated professionals have often worked long hours for little pay to guarantee that all people, regardless of limitations, would have access to quality recreation and leisure experiences. These programs were

traditionally offered in the institutional setting to those individuals residing there. The majority of therapeutic recreation personnel were employed in hospitals, nursing homes, and rehabilitation centers.

With the passage of legislation that affected the lives of special populations, the mainstreaming movement, increased advocacy of the rights of the disabled, and expanded philosophies of, and approaches to, service delivery, the practice of therapeutic recreation consultation emerged. The consultant was almost always employed by public and non-profit agencies to help overcome the problems caused by understaffing of programs, unqualified staff, lack of resources, low priority given to the leisure needs of the disabled, and the limited public awareness of the nature and benefits of therapeutic recreation (5).

THE CONSULTANT TURNS ENTREPRENEUR

In the past several years a new trend in the career path of the therapeutic recreation consultant has emerged: the entrepreneur. The major characteristic of the entrepreneur is the ability to create an ongoing enterprise where none existed before. Bringing together the ideas, skills, money, equipment, and markets into a profitable combination reflects the ability to conceptualize and organize a new business venture (4). Those individuals who have self-confidence, drive, energy, desires for responsibility and independence, a willingness to take risks, and are future-oriented (1), will have a chance for success in this challenging new career opportunity: the private, profit-oriented enterprise. Going into business can be a great adventure or a great disaster, depending on how well the prospective owner prepares through investigation and analysis of the situation (3). It requires a significant financial investment, extensive marketing skill, and the ability to think like a businessman or woman.

Therapeutic recreation specialists are getting in step with the current economic climate. They are beginning to look outside of the traditional employers of therapeutic recreation professionals, as they search for expanded outlets for their growing skills. The increased sophistication of therapeutic recreation education and advanced degree opportunities have increased the qualifications and capabilities of personnel. Yet agencies offer little chance to apply these advanced techniques, and often do not appreciate the efforts made and risks taken by the therapeutic recreation staff.

SCOPE OF PRIVATE PRACTICE

The demand is there. Consumers of services—individuals disabled as a result of a catastrophic injury, those with mental problems, substance abusers, retirees, and anyone who is dissatisfied and seeking changes in his/her lifestyle—are growing in numbers. With the heightened awareness of the role of recreation and leisure in society will come the need to

provide education and guidance. The therapeutic recreation entrepreneur stands ready to satisfy this need.

Many clients are better served by the private consultant who has the time and the extensive network of resources to provide in-depth, individualized therapeutic recreation. By not charging appropriate fees, the therapeutic recreation entrepreneur will not be taken seriously by physicians and other allied health personnel who are frequently responsible for referring individuals to the private service provider. The recreation professional has been reluctant to make a profit from his/her professional services, and to demand of fellow professionals the credentials necessary to earn the respect of others. A minimum of a master's degree, extensive clinical experience, and business skills are recommended by Steven Sokolof (8), of Recreational Associates, in order to convince physicians and insurance companies of the need for therapeutic recreation services for individuals outside of the institutional setting. Hospital programs frequently do not provide the disabled with enough planning for their lives after discharge. The private therapeutic recreation consultant can work with people in their own homes and communities in order to develop a new and satisfying leisure lifestyle. But one needs to be aggressive and persistent in order to become accepted as a viable professional.

CHALLENGES FACING THE ENTREPRENEUR

Leisure Lifestyle Counselors and Consultants was established by Roslyn K. Rudolph (7), who desired to promote the public recognition of leisure as an enhancement of people's total well-being, by educating other professionals and by providing individual and group leisure counseling and program planning for special populations. Mrs. Rudolph received a great deal of free information from the Small Business Administration, and consulted lawyers, accountants, and public relations firms for advice in setting up her own practice. Promoting and marketing her services has been the most difficult aspect of her new business. Although not being afraid to ask questions is essential to success, those employed in other fields are still not aware of the total recreation profession and what it does. Therefore, they are often unable to provide appropriate advice on key concerns. Even within the therapeutic recreation field, many professionals still resent those who charge for providing information and consultation to agencies, and who charge fees for services to clients.

Dr. John Beaulieu (2) of the Polarity Wellness Center also encountered difficulties with the business aspects of his enterprise: bookkeeping systems, office organization, and publicity require administrative expertise. However, knowing one's own strengths and how to sell that to others are essential to success in meeting the demands for wellness education and leisure awareness.

Irv Segal (9) of The Guided Tour has succeeded in another aspect of the provision of recreation to special populations: travel for the handicapped. In its formative years the concept was so new that the bulk

of his time was spent educating and informing the lay and professional communities on the value of travel for disabled individuals. Acceptance by the community and generation of sufficient funds to sustain the service has been difficult. Despite streamlining of procedures to dovetail with sound business practices, i.e. computerized lists, automated preparation of salaries, taxes, etc. the process that has been most difficult is to become less of a recreator and more of a businessman, a necessity for fiscal stability. If one is operating a travel agency, responsibility ends with the completion of the trip. Segal goes beyond this by providing the family or referring agency extensive feedback on the traveler's experience, evaluating positive efforts and indications of personal growth, defining possible problem areas, and making recommendations for the future. This has not always been well-received by the staff that made the initial referral, resulting in the loss of the traveler as a client of The Guided Tours.

STARTING A PRIVATE ENTERPRISE

Over half of all entrepreneurial failures are due to lack of managerial ability and experience (1). The first step to success is to choose a lawyer who is well-versed in corporate law, experienced working with new companies, and from a well-established firm with a good reputation in the community. Liability and the rights of the handicapped are legal issues that are of special concern to recreators. Charging a fair price for services is critical to success, because without making a profit the enterprise will not survive. Beware of customers looking for bargains. They may not pay their bills. One formula to charge for services is to multiply the service-providers' hourly salary by three, which takes into account direct and indirect labor costs and profit (6).

Operating an office out of one's house saves money and permits the utilization of household resources. Acquiring basic office equipment and supplies; legal, accounting and insurance fees; and the costs of professional memberships and literature all add up to a significant investment.

MARKETING AND SALES

The name of the company should be simple, dignified, and reflect what potential clients should remember about an enterprise. Hiring a free-lance professional artist to design a logo to be used on stationary, business cards, brochures, advertisements and visual aids enhances the polished image of written materials.

Market research through personal interviews and questionnaires may be time-consuming but yields valuable information that can help shape direction and policies. Making contacts at professional meetings and trade shows, and writing articles and press releases on the activities of the new enterprise are free and valuable forms of publicity.

Selling the service, whether or not one is a born salesperson, is the crucial factor and often the most difficult one for therapeutic recreation personnel. This product has not yet been accepted as essential and worthy of a fee by the public and by the professionals who provide referrals. Knowing the facts about the benefits of therapeutic recreation and being able to articulate that, traditionally have been areas in which therapeutic recreation professionals are weak. Belief in one's product, that conviction, and the ability to convey that to others, makes the sale.

STAFF NEEDS

The therapeutic recreation entrepreneur should have available other professionals to work as needed. This increases the talent and skills of a company, increases its exposure, and enables the filling of client requests on short notice. Meeting regularly with this staff and establishing an equitable salary schedule contributes to a smooth operation.

Staff productivity, including the entrepreneur's, is increased by having the workday scheduled with specific intervals for telephone calls, handling correspondence, meetings, research, etc. Reducing interruptions, even by leaving the office to work in a library or similar quiet place, keeps one refreshed and motivated.

Working no more than ten hours per day, six days per week, with time for exercise, recreation, family, friends, and vacations is essential to maintaining good health, enthusiasm, and high energy. Being flexible and willing to change are most important, especially in the early stages of the enterprise.

CONCLUSION

The tasks involved in starting and running one's own business are not insurmountable. For those who desire challenge and adventure, and are willing to take risks, filling the role of the entrepreneur can expand the scope of the therapeutic recreation profession by providing more direct services to the many people whom it can benefit.

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