

“YOU’RE OUT THERE FOR ONE ANOTHER”: TEAM FUNDRAISING AND MASS PARTICIPATION SPORT EVENTS

Emma Sherry, Kevin Filo
LaTrobe University
Griffith University

Large-scale participatory sport events such as marathons, walks, runs, and cycling tours have been deemed to be effective mechanisms for bolstering the prestige of a community while advancing an active and healthy lifestyle in the area (Edwards & Tsouros, 2008). Increasingly, these mass participation sport events are inviting participants to raise funds on behalf of a charity of their choice (Nettleton & Hardey, 2006), often as part of a fundraising team (Olberding & Jisha, 2005). These trends have coincided with a time during which charities face a number of challenges to obtain donations (Barton & Hall, 2011) including a general suspicion of charitable causes (Polonsky, 2003), an unstable economic climate (Institute for Philanthropy, 2009), and perhaps most interestingly, the notion of ‘fundraising fatigue’, wherein prospective fundraisers have grown hesitant to ask for donations amidst resistance from potential donors (Rigby, 2011). This research examines a highly successful fundraising team (Mands’ Mob) participating in a large-scale run in Melbourne, Australia (Run Melbourne). Specifically, this research applies social exchange theory (SET) to investigate the exchanges inherent to participating in Run Melbourne via Mands’ Mob to uncover the facets of this team that contribute to success. Uncovering these facets will provide insights for fundraising teams to overcome existing challenges, while outlining best practices for successful fundraising through mass participation sport events.

Run Melbourne is an annual community fitness run offering distances of 5km, 10km, and a half marathon. In 2012, 26,000 individuals participated in Run Melbourne. In addition to the run, the event encourages participants to raise funds for a cause of their choice. The Mands’ Mob fundraising team is inspired by and named after Mandy ‘Mands’ Herbert, an ovarian cancer survivor. Co-founded by Mandy’s daughters, Mands’ Mob was established to raise funds and awareness for the Ovarian Cancer Research Foundation (OCRF). In 2012, Mands’ Mob had 75 runners raising a total of \$37,480 for the OCRF, and the team finished second overall in the team fundraising category within Run Melbourne.

SET advances that social exchange encompasses a series of interactions that create obligation (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). These exchanges involve actions by individuals contingent upon mutually rewarding actions from others (Emerson, 1976) and all relationships are formed by the use of a subjective cost-benefit analysis. Applied to the context of team fundraising in a mass participation sport event, exchanges may include the act of training, fundraising, and participating in the event in exchange for support and rewards from team organisers and other team members. The current research investigates these exchanges within Mands’ Mob to determine the factors that contribute to team success.

Method and analysis:

Qualitative data were collected from members of Mands’ Mob. A total of six focus groups were conducted with a sample of team members four weeks in advance and six weeks following the event (n=3; n=4; n=6). Focus groups within a case study method were chosen as the most appropriate research method best suited to gaining insights into both the individuals’ and groups shared understanding of their participation within the event and team (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The focus group participants were 50% female, and ranged in age from 25-45, a representative sample of the Mands’ Mob team overall. Four individuals had previously participated in the event as a member of the team, while nine were participating for the first time. The focus groups explored how participants got involved with the team, their connection to the cause, and their engagement with the team as the group prepared for the event and post-event. The transcriptions for each focus group were analysed using thematic coding of transcripts, followed by further categorisation of overarching themes; using established qualitative coding procedures (cf. Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Results and discussion:

Participants described the actions that were required for participating with Mands’ Mob, along with the actions in place rewarding and reinforcing their efforts. Specifically, participants described their need for incentives to train to complete the run, along with their reluctance to fundraise through soliciting donations from others. However, in describing these exchanges, the participants noted the initiatives in place within the team to address these challenges. For instance, participants indicated that the constant e-mail communication within the team served as an incentive throughout the training: “I enjoy doing the running side of things anyway so having these

constant reminders and emails coming out reminding you not only are you just doing the run but that you're also supporting a pretty worthy cause is really good motivation I find." Participants also revealed that this communication served to humanise the cause, providing reminders of the team's strong and personal connection with the charity. The team is dedicated to an individual currently undergoing treatment for ovarian cancer, and this personal story served as a rallying point for team members as demonstrated with the following quote: "Humanising it, is the word. ... you can you actually see someone who's actually going through a type of illness or a disease ... you can actually see that that money does go towards the benefit of something and someone greater."

Across all focus groups, participants noted concerns regarding fundraising due to apprehension towards asking others for money, along with the sheer number of worthy causes that exist. Fundraising fatigue was mentioned throughout the focus groups, exemplified with the following quote: "For me I haven't actually done any [fundraising] either and the reason probably is that because I said I've done a few of these sort of things I sort of find like I'm going back to the well, to the same people, all the time and it's not that I don't think that it's any less of a worthy cause or anything like that, it's just that I'm conscious of not continually having ... to keep asking people for money, even though it's a very worthy cause and it's a charitable donation and everything else." Nonetheless, in detailing fundraising fatigue, team members stated that the team organisers had developed a number of social events in which team members could participate to assist in fundraising without having to directly solicit donations. These events were also advanced as critical mechanisms to build camaraderie among the team. One participant explained how the events such as a trivia night allowed her to overcome trepidations concerning fundraising while enjoying time with her teammates: "My friends love trivia so it was just a good excuse to raise money and have a good night.... I am one of those people that hate asking for donations for kind of things and... there's so many charities out there and I just can't feel guilty... it was easier to sort of say 'look, let's go play trivia, it'll cost you 20 bucks or whatever it was, and you're donating to a good cause' and yeah, I got a table together and it was great fun and I just ... I found that easier to get across."

This study highlights the exchanges that exist within a fundraising team in a mass participation sport event. SET argues that interactions that elicit approval from others are more likely to be repeated, thus the actions required of team members in terms of training and participating can be rewarded and reinforced through constant communication regarding team objectives and activities. In particular, personalised messaging within this communication can serve to humanise the cause and further motivate participants. This underscores the importance of personal narratives to team building (Collison & McKenzie, 1999). Meanwhile, the effort required to fundraise on behalf of the team can be offset and rewarded through the development of social events serving as alternate fundraising mechanisms. These events can not only overcome reluctance on the part of team members to solicit donations, but also facilitate social bonding (Chalip, 2006). Fundraising teams can adapt these practices to bolster fundraising and retain team members. Future research can examine additional teams and events, while also adopting a network analysis to examine team composition.