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Autism Health and Wellness Symposium

Sponsored by CARD; USF

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A Day With CARD: Volunteer Experience Project

Volunteer Communications:

The event I volunteered at was a one-day event that mimicked the style of a conference or convention center because it was formally held at a hotel with vendors and speakers presenting throughout the event. The event was geared towards parents that had children with autism spectrum disorders and provided information on various aspects of dealing with the disorder. My particular role was to collect evaluation handouts that parents attending speaker presentations were given as they entered the ballrooms. Although that was the only assigned task I had to do, I soon realized I had more on my plate than I had anticipated. For instance, attendees were constantly asking me where the next speaker was presenting and what the topics were about as they left the one room with the speaker I was assigned to. The volunteer committee had never even informed me of any other presentations or where they were being held, even when I had sought out the information for myself. The problem was that there was no program for the event so people were quite confused as to what was happening and at what time. Luckily, I was able to figure out where certain events were being held just by being attentive and was able to pass on the information to the attendees. The other people I was working with had no idea that I was supposed to work with them because I got assigned to my task by someone who was not even involved with my task. I felt like I had a poor sense of direction, even though all

I had to do was collect papers. Poor communication resulted in me constantly having to run around the event like a store clerk taking a customer to a product. When I arrived at the hotel, I had no idea where to go and if I hadn't recognized another volunteer who already knew where the event was, I would have not known where to go. I feel like there should be some sort of training session for all the volunteers before they simply get thrown into the work, because there is a high probability they are feeling uneasy about the task they are performing. I did not really experience any generally good communication techniques of the volunteers, however on the management side volunteers were quickly assigned to their workstations. There was definitely a plan in the works but it was poorly executed.

The Surroundings:

Although the volunteers of the event were a bit unsure and uninformed about their duties, the employees were pretty well taken care of. The event was a non-profit, so mostly everyone who worked there came on his or her own time, but the guest speakers and marketing coordinators were always well prepared and knew where to go and what to do. The marketing/event coordinators that were responsible for the event were always making sure vendors were in the right spot and that the speakers had enough time to present. In cases where small accidents happened, someone was always ready to respond. The accident I'm referring to is when the door of a conference room got locked and no one could get in or out. An employee for CARD immediately paged hotel staff to unlock the door and together, they fixed the problem. Vendors had a pretty good experience at the event. The event coordinator made sure there was a floor plan for all the various vendors and that they stuck to it. The vendors were greeted by a CARD volunteer and

taken to their station where they could set up. Attendees also seemed to enjoy themselves, but a major problem was parking and overall lack of information. Attendees were not told where they could park because the hotel parking was rather full from various events happening on-campus including a soccer match. Another complaint is that there was no program for the event so attendees had to rely on volunteers and staff to tell them where certain speakers, vendors and events would be.

Media is the Message:

The AHWS event was promoted on a variety of platforms. The organizers informed me that social media was the biggest and most promotional media they used for the event. CARD which is the non-profit autism organization dedicated to providing information and resources for anyone affected by autism, has its own Facebook page with special chapters assigned to each of the various regions it runs in Florida. The Tampa region has its own page where the event was promoted and had 400 people RSVP for. CARD also has its own website where the event was promoted. In other media, the event was featured on social life blogs like “What’s Doing Tampa Bay,” as well as the Tampa Bay Times. Some brochures were also provided at doctor’s offices that have a partnership with CARD. The event organizers say the event is well known enough that they do not have to do too much promotion. The marketing budget is almost non-existent and even the print advertisements were done for free because of all the good CARD does in the community. My critique for how they went about promoting the event is mainly directed at awareness. Media impressions including social media do not necessarily guarantee a good turnout, even if the event is well known. One of the organizers suggested charging for the event because so many people registered for it but only about half even showed

up. I do agree with this suggestion, perhaps even charging a little will mean that people will attend the event because they have paid for it. However, I feel that the Facebook page, being that it is so easy to update, should be updated more frequently to remind people of the event. CARD should know how busy parents could be especially with children affected by autism.

An Evaluation:

This event furthers the goals of the organization by providing a place where members of the community can interact with people dealing with mutual problems as well as vendors that can provide resources for autism awareness. The speakers, which include various doctors, psychologists and nutritionists, help the parents and others affected by autism to learn more about something that affects them in an educational manner. Sometimes looking for these resources by yourself is difficult and the event allowed attendees to speak with important researchers and specialists in the field. That kind of interaction is always more trustworthy. Ultimately, it also provided a means of evaluation for the organization, because good feedback from the attendees is what allows the non-profit to receive funding from the state. They also promoted the importance of the organization within the community by hosting this event, inviting private donors to invest as well.

