



PERCEIVED MARKETING STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF ELITE DISABLED SPORT ORGANIZATIONS IN THE UNITED STATES

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INTRODUCTION

The nonprofit sector is big business within the overall economy in the United States. Drucker (2001) noted that nonprofit organizations are the nation's largest employer. A study of the American Society of Association Executives (ASAE) reported that nonprofit organizations hold more collective power and influence in corporate America than any other business sector in our nation (Sommer, 1998). However, amongst the most overlooked nonprofit organizations are disabled sports organizations.

Elite disabled sport organizations (DSO) provide programs for outstanding athletes who have certain disabilities. Presently, there are seven disabled sport organizations recognized by the United States Olympic Committee (USOC) that represent over 1.6 million disabled sport elite athletes (Miller, Veltri, & Combs, 2002). These elite disabled sport organizations must demonstrate that they can incorporate their programs and the way they do business into USOC programs and not be a financial liability. They must be capable of developing fund sources for grass-root and entry-level athletic programs and events. Disabled sport organizations are obliged to continue to seek new and innovative methods to secure financial stability and build a relationship of support. To accomplish these goals disabled sport organizations must effectively market their products, otherwise known as programs within nonprofit terminology, as a tangible service.

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In order to successfully develop a program, the organization should possess a clear comprehension of the characteristics of clients as well as how to meet their needs. The understanding of a client's characteristics and needs comes from the conduction of an effective marketing analysis (Higgins & Lauzon, 2003). A marketing analysis provides a problem-structuring tool that can help decision makers ask the appropriate questions about the agency's mission, programs, and interaction with the external environment (Bryson, 1988). When executed properly, a marketing analysis can assist in recognizing the organizational strengths and weaknesses, thus allowing nonprofit executives to focus and evaluate results and assist in implementing successful marketing strategies.

Nonprofit organizations depend on the external environment for their survival. Therefore, to successfully create or obtain the needed operational assets, a nonprofit organization (NPO) leader must be familiar with ways to develop a strategic plan that best fits into the NPO's political, economic, and social environments. Because NPO's are usually embedded in larger political, economic, and social systems, NPO leaders should study and anticipate such environments and assess their current positions in future

options, particularly their potential funding opportunities. Strategic planning is a significant planning and management tool for an organization's existence and to fully adapt to its changing environment.

For this investigation, strategic planning is defined as the organized activity through which an entity prepares for its future. "Environmental scanning" and "SWOT analysis" are two popular methods of strategic analysis and planning that were first developed by Ansoff (1965), but later refined by Porter (1985). Slack (1996) reported that strategy, whether planned and deliberate, may emerge as a stream of significant decisions or be some combination of both. In either case, organizational decision makers base their choice of strategy on their perceptions of opportunities and threats in the environment and internal strengths and weaknesses of their organization. As a result of the strategy decision makers choose, an appropriate strategy is instituted (Slack, 1996).

Limited investigations regarding disabled sport organizations have been conducted (Angelica & Hyman, 1997; Corbin, 1999; McMurty, Netting, & Kettner, 1991; Miller, Veltri, & Combs, 2002), no research has been done regarding the marketing strategies of elite disabled sport organizations. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate the perceived marketing strengths and weaknesses and the related opportunities and threats of elite disabled sport organizations.

ELEMENTARY PRINCIPLES OF SWOT ANALYSIS

An integral component of an organization's strategic plan should be an analysis of its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. According to Kearns (2000), SWOT analysis presumes that goals and strategies surface from the juxtaposition of opportunities and threats in the external environment and strengths and weaknesses in the internal environment, thus providing a SWOT matrix. A SWOT matrix requires administrators to picture their organization working together with factors in the dynamic external environment that can either assist or hamper development for the mission of the endeavor (Hackbarth & Kettinger, 2000).

Bryson (1988) reported that when conducted correctly that a SWOT analysis can assist nonprofit executives to better recognize and clarify basic choices that may be faced by the decision. The SWOT analysis can provide a way for the agency decision-makers to ask the correct questions in relating the agency's mission and programs to the external environment. According to Kearns (1992), SWOT analysis represents the theoretical and practical foundation of strategic planning by focusing attention on environmental trends that could impact the mission and policy of the agency. A SWOT analysis can be either an effective management device or a cursory or insincere exercise. A large amount depends on the attention with which decision makers incorporate their analyses of internal and external factors affecting the future of the organization. As such, to meet goals and objectives, organizational planners must continuously reassess their organization's mission, purpose, basic values, capabilities, overall performance, and future orientation and vision (Mixer, 1993).

Kearns (1992) recommended that the external environment, represented by the opportunities and threats, be analyzed prior to the internal environment or strengths and weaknesses. The logic is that the organization must respond to the external

environment, not vice versa (Espy, 1986). For example, decision makers should focus more intently on strengths and weaknesses in the internal environment. Doing so will expand the preliminary list of strengths and weaknesses generated in the first step of the SWOT analysis. Basically, the value of this second iteration is to stimulate additional reflection on the preliminary lists of external and internal factors. Decision makers then should emphasize the process of identifying external factors as being closely coordinated with the identification of internal factors. Thus, by identifying each opportunity or threat, decision makers could immediately begin the process of integration. This leads to the third step in the SWOT analysis which constitutes a "matching" exercise. The objective is to identify salient links between internal strengths and weaknesses and external opportunities and threats (Kearns, 1992).

Bryson (1988) discussed two categories of external environments: societal and task. The societal environment is composed of political, economic, socioculture, and technological (PEST) factors. The range of specific forces within PEST categories is quite extensive.

In general, the societal environment includes "macro" factors and trends such as life-style changes, inflation, and legislative initiatives that may positively or negatively affect the agency's mission and goals. The task environment, on the other hand, is context specific and is composed of factors and trends directly related to the agency's missions and goals or to those of competitor agencies (Kearns, 2000). Porter (1985) stated that:

Forces in the task environment include, among others, competitive rivalry among existing agencies, the potential threat of substitute products, and changes in the power or perceived need of specific groups of stakeholders such as clients, suppliers, interest groups, or donors (p. 6).

These "micro" factors and trends are unique to organizations that produce similar services. Their analysis is sometimes called an "industry analysis" (Kearns, 1992).

Two primary observations emerge from organizations implementing SWOT analysis (Kearns, 2000). First, decision makers often are victim to one or several pitfalls that can be traced to the failure to carefully, and in an iterative manner, examine the relations among external and internal factors. As a result, the SWOT analysis can degenerate into a superficial and misleading list-generating exercise. Second, quality and rigor of the SWOT analysis improve when decision makers introduce a simple, yet powerful, organizing framework. This framework evolves from repeated observations of the internal and external factors of the organization. Through extensive analysis and initial difficulties encountered in applying SWOT methodology can create positive marketing results from decision makers who use it (Kearns, 2000).

METHOD

INSTRUMENT VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY

The researchers developed a forced-choice questionnaire that addressed potential strengths, weakness, opportunities, and threats of non-profit organizations. To determine reliability, the questionnaire was sent to ten non-profit organization experts. After completing the questionnaire initially, the experts were asked to complete the questionnaire after a one-week interval to ascertain test-retest reliability. The reliability

coefficient was determined to be at .84, an acceptable level when interpreting responses from individuals (Patten, 2000).

Since a survey with acceptable reliability may have low validity, the researchers sent the questionnaire to five non-profit experts, other than had previously helped to determine reliability, to determine validity. Content validity is when a question adequately reflects the underlying behavior or body of knowledge (Patten, 2000). Content validity was established after having all of the experts read, evaluate and agree that the questionnaire items were relevant and valid.

POPULATION SAMPLE

The participants in this study were selected from the seven national disabled sports organizations that are recognized as United States Olympic Committee (USOC) member organizations. These organizations were the United States Association of Blind Athletes (USABA), Dwarf Athletic Association of America (DAAA), United States Cerebral Palsy Athletic Association (USCPAA), Wheelchair Sport USA (WSUSA), Disabled Sports USA (DSUSA), Special Olympics International (SOI), and the USA Deaf Sports Federation (USADSF).

Two administrators per organization were contacted by phone and/or email asking them to partake in the investigation. All fourteen accepted the invitation and were sent the questionnaire survey. The respondents from each of the disabled sport organizations held the titles of president, chief executive officer, executive director of the respective organization, or were a member of the organization's Board of Directors. To obtain the information, the respondents, as representatives of their respective disabled sport organizations (DSO), were granted anonymity on the return envelope provided to the respondents. Thus, the researchers could only identify the organization by the designations DSO1, DSO2, DSO3 and so on. Within two weeks of the initial mailing, all respondents had returned the survey.

RESULTS

STRATEGIC MARKETING PROCESSES OF THE DISABLED SPORT ORGANIZATIONS

All disabled sport organizations reported that they had established a strategic market plan through a predetermined process (Table 1). Seven of the organizations reported that their organizations possessed a four-year strategic marketing plan. However, one organization revealed that their strategic marketing plans were conducted on an annual basis, thus providing a comparatively short ranged strategic marketing plan.

Categorically, respondents from DSO1, DSO3, DSO4, and DSO5 reported that their organization followed a four year strategic marketing plans that was the result of internal development by the board members and executive directors. DSO7 also indicated that they too followed a four year strategic marketing plan; however, it was externally developed using USOC guidelines. DSO2 was the only disabled sport organization to adhere to a one year strategic marketing plan.

DISABLED SPORT ORGANIZATION STRATEGIC MARKETING SWOT ANALYSIS STRATEGIC MARKETING STRENGTHS

Table 2 identifies the strategic marketing strengths of the disabled sport organizations as perceived by the respondents. Six of the seven organizations identified celebrity endorsements of the organization as the most commonly cited strength. Celebrities were chief executive officers of major corporations, athletes, or entertainers who provided name association between organization and celebrity. Five of the organizations acknowledged name recognition as and helping other nonprofit organizations as perceived organizational marketing strengths. Four of the disabled sport organizations revealed that being affiliated with the Olympics as a strength. Three of the organizations identified the marketing expertise of their board members as a strength. Three nonprofits recognized their staff as a professional strength while only two perceived their ability to obtain corporate sponsorship as a marketing strength. Only one of the disabled sport organizations in the study reported that market studies were an organizational strength.

By organization, DSO1 was the only disabled sport organization to report possessing all of the previously identified marketing strengths such as professional staff, Olympic affiliation, experienced board members, ability to help other disabled sport organizations, conduction of market studies, name recognition, and the ability to attract corporate sponsors as well as celebrity endorsers. DSO1 was the only disabled sport organization that conducted market studies. DSO2 reported having seven of the strengths identified by the consensus, missing only the conduct of market studies. DSO3 and DSO4 indicated that they each possessed four of the identified strengths; however they were somewhat different strengths. DSO3 revealed their strengths to be a professional staff, helping other disabled sport organizations, name recognition, and celebrity endorsers. DSO4 identified marketing expertise of board members, helping other disabled sport organizations and celebrity endorsers as their strengths. DSO5 reported two items as strengths: their affiliation with the Olympics and helping other disabled sport organizations. DSO6 identified their affiliation with the Olympics while DSO7 indicated board member expertise as their respective strengths

STRATEGIC MARKETING WEAKNESSES

Six of the seven disabled sport organizations cited low public awareness of the Olympic affiliated disabled sport organizations as the most prevalent weakness (Table 3). This finding is illustrated as one individual stated that approximately 3000 out of 100,000, or 3% of the population in an area which they were conducting an international contest for athletes with disabilities, were aware of the athletic competitions available to disabled athletes. Five of the disabled sport organizations perceived both poor fundraising and collaboration with other disabled sport organizations as marketing weaknesses. Three of the respondents identified that poor market value was an organizational marketing weakness while two of the organizations reported poor donor tracking unsophisticated marketing techniques were perceived as marketing weaknesses.

Table 3 also identifies by organization that DSO7 reported that they possessed four of the acknowledged weaknesses. DSO2, DSO3, DSO5, and DSO6 reported three of the weaknesses while DSO1 revealed one marketing weakness, while one disabled sport organization reportedly possessed no perceived marketing weaknesses.

STRATEGIC MARKETING OPPORTUNITIES

Six of the organizations cited the ability to educate the public about disabilities as the most important opportunity (Table 4). Collaboration with other disabled sport organizations was identified as a strategic marketing opportunity by 4 of the respondents as was the ability to collaborate with non-disabled organizations. Werther and Berman (2001) reported that nonprofit organizations should take advantage of their uniqueness and attempt to form alliances with other for-profit and/or nonprofit organizations with similar missions. For example, since all of the disabled sport organizations in this study had a parallel theme, they could pool their resources to increase public awareness. This could potentially increase their ability to influence public opinion, thereby legitimizing and marketing value of their respective organizations.

Two of the respondents revealed that the opportunity to target federal sources as well as conducting more events were important opportunities for their organizations. Conducting more events was indicated by two organizations as well. Two of the organizations indicated that joint marketing development with other organizations as an opportunity.

STRATEGIC MARKETING THREATS

All of the organizations perceived competition with other disabled sport organizations as their primary threat. All seven organizations identified not having enough funds available as the second most cited threat. Marketing myth, relating to the perception of the public as to who receives the money, was cited by 4 of the organizations. Two of the responses perceived that the fragmentation of the disabled sport organization was a definite threat. Not having a qualified staff was revealed for 2 of the 7 organizations. Interestingly, only one of the organizations perceived a bias against the disabled as a threat.

Table 5 reveals the responses by the respective disabled sport organizations. DSO5, DSO6, and DSO7 identified the greatest number of strategic marketing threats with four. DSO1, DSO2, and DSO3 reported 3 marketing threats to their respective organizations. One disabled sport organization, DSO4, stated that they had only 1 of the specified threats to their strategic marketing. The reader should note that this is the same organization that reported no organizational weaknesses. Perhaps it is because this disabled sport organization conducted an annual strategic marketing plan, possessed the largest number of athletes, and sponsored the greatest number of sports that they perceived minimal or no weaknesses or threats.

Since the key to success of a nonprofit organization, particularly disabled sport organizations, is the ability to produce results, there is an increased expectation to view outcomes as being visible, measurable, and relevant to the vision and/or mission of the organization (Werther & Berman, 2001). For this expectation to occur, the decision maker(s) must be able to identify their respective strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats on a continual basis. By identifying weaknesses and threats, the leaders can

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prepare the organization to make the most of the circumstances when they arise and avoid adversity when it strikes (Ray, 1997).

DISCUSSION

Strategic marketing analysis and planning is critical for the success of any organization (Beilefield, 1994; Stevens, Loudon, Wrenn, & Warren, 1997). Disabled sport organizations are not unlike other nonprofit organizations that should give attention to their marketing strategies to help take full advantage of potential funding and support (Wenham, Stephens & Hardy, 2003). While all of the disabled sport organizations used strategic marketing plans to help develop and reach their goals, only one conducted their strategic marketing plans on an annual basis.

It should be noted that there is a danger in conducting long-term strategic marketing plans as organizations may find themselves behind the times (Maranville, 1999). Strategic market planning on an annual basis may help the organization look at itself differently by revealing how every element of a business affects its potential success. The leaders would then be forced to establish a definite mission with a corresponding plan on how to fulfill the mission in accordance with the time frame established (Ray, 1997). Though each organization is unique in its' planning due to different values, history, and culture, the majority of nonprofit organizations should have at least a one-year plan (Werther & Berman, 2001).

It is interesting to note that the smallest DSO in the study had developed a 4-year plan by adopting the USOC guidelines. Therefore, it may be inferred that a smaller disabled organization, without multiple marketing strengths, may rely on an external agency (USOC) for guidance. However, this situation can only be effective if the organization possesses the same personnel and commitment as the external agency it is following. If this is not the case, the decision makers may have a difficult time relating DSO's mission, programs, and interaction to it's' employees and constituents.

The greatest number of marketing strengths was reported by the two biggest disabled sport organizations. Conversely, two of the smaller disabled sport organizations indicated the least number of strengths. Thus, it may be inferred that the perception of marketing strengths may be directly related to the size of the disabled sport organization.

In this study, size reflects the number of athletes within the organization, the number of sports sponsored, and the annual income of the disabled sport organization. This may perhaps be the result of a greater annual income attracting professional staff members, corporate sponsors, and celebrity endorsers. In the past nonprofit organizations relied exclusively on the rich to fund their causes. Today more nonprofit organizations are incorporating the use of celebrities. However, celebrities and their effectiveness require marketing strategies to provide public awareness as well as provide enhanced credibility and appeal to your event. Marketed correctly the celebrity can increase exposure, boost attendance, and strengthen the marketability of the event (Veltri, Kuzma, Stotlar, Viswanthan, & Miller, 2003).

Also, by having a greater number of disabled athletes and sponsoring more sports, a disabled sport organization may have a better chance for name recognition from the

general public. The smaller sized DSOs may have not possessed the economic means to attract professional staff members, corporate sponsors, or celebrity endorsers. They may need to rely on their affiliation with the Olympics or appeal to die-hard aficionados of their sport to serve as a board member. Thus, size may significantly matter regarding to the perceived strength of a disabled sport organization in this study.

Interestingly, one of the disabled sport organizations indicated that they did not possess any marketing weaknesses. The researchers' question whether this report was a realistic assessment, however, due to the anonymity provided the researchers could not address this aspect directly to the source. It would seem that any organization that does not perceive weaknesses might not be able to react to potential threats, i.e. loss of position, until it is too late. The belief that the organization possesses no weakness could also create stagnation in regards to future marketing methods marketing segments shift (Stotlar, 2001).

The overwhelming majority of organizations in this study cited low public awareness as a weakness. The findings support Wolf (1999) who found that although disabled sport organizations actively sought to legitimize sports competition and training for people with disabilities within the United States, legitimacy was lacking because of poor awareness. This lack of awareness may have also been critical in identifying poor market value and poor fund raising as marketing weaknesses. This would confirm Drucker (2001), who reported that the general public ties the market value and ability to raise funds of a non-profit organization to the level of awareness of the service or product.

It is ironic to consider that most of the disabled sport organizations reported collaborating with other disabled sport organizations as strength and a weakness. Perhaps it is this confusion that creates the low public awareness afflicting the disabled sport organizations in this study. Werther and Berman (2001) reported that nonprofit organizations should take advantage of that characteristic and attempt to form alliances with other nonprofits with similar distinctions. However, collaboration may be very frustrating for nonprofit leaders as it requires the executives to carefully consider with whom they really want to serve (McNamara, 2005).

By developing marketing strategies that would incorporate collaborative processes, the disabled sport organizations may be better able to reach out to the unaware nonconsumer. Mullin, Hardy, and Sutton (2000) identified taking the unaware nonconsumer of a service to becoming a consumer as the first step in the attendance/participation frequency escalator. Once this first step is accomplished the effective marketer should attempt to make the aware nonconsumer into a consumer to whom the marketer can communicate the benefits of competing, training and attending disabled sporting events. Eventually, as the consumer becomes more aware of the benefits of the disabled sport organization, he/she may escalate to the point of being a heavy consumer or supporter of the organization.

Once this first step is accomplished the effective marketer seize the opportunity to make the aware nonconsumer into a consumer to whom the marketer can communicate the benefits of competing, training and attending disabled sporting events. Eventually, as the consumer becomes more aware of the benefits of the disabled sport organization,

he/she may escalate to the point of being a heavy consumer or supporter of the organization. This should increase the opportunity for the organizations to potentially increased its' market value and ability to raise funds.

Werther and Berman (2001) reported that nonprofit organizations should take advantage of that characteristic and attempt to form alliances with other nonprofits with similar distinctions. For example, since all of the disabled sport organizations in this study had a similar theme, they could pool their resources to increase public awareness. This could potentially increase their ability to influence public opinion, thereby legitimizing and marketing value of their respective organizations.

CONCLUSION

Because of their unique characteristics and mission, disabled sport organizations should be able to flourish but information about them is not nearly as obvious as private or other philanthropic organizations. While the daily television and other media coverage of the most recently completed Olympics in Athens, Greece can be considered a marketing bonanza, elite disabled sport organizations are not as fortunate. They must make certain for future purposes that they will not be a financial liability and will be capable of developing fund sources for grass-root, entry-level athletic programs and events as well as the internationally attended Paralympic Games.

Strategic marketing can validate the impact on the constituents and fine tune the delivery of program services thereby saving cost and time. This affords the organization an opportunity for excellent client testimonials that can be used for public relations and credibility when applying for funding. (McNamara, 2005). However, to successfully accomplish this, strategic marketing evaluations should be conducted by disabled sport organizations on a regular basis. By doing so they will be able to determine if the programs are reaching their goals, achieving their outcomes and if they are doing so in an efficient manner.

Disabled sport organizations are in competition with other nonprofit organization to secure financial recourses, thus posing a potential threat to each other and they must develop and hone competitive skills to compete. However, as they conduct a marketing analysis and implement marketing strategy, each disabled sport organization decision maker should consider the process of collaboration to enhance their services for several reasons. First, an increasing number of funders are requiring evidence of collaboration planning from nonprofits applying for funding. Secondly, in working together, there's an economy of scale, or sharing of resources, that lowers costs and focuses more resources on serving clients. Thus, successful collaboration allows for two or more organizations to work together in human and economic synergy. Finally, appropriate collaboration increases the organization's market value and its ability to raise funds. For example, since all of the disabled sport organizations in this study had a similar theme, they could pool their resources to increase public awareness. This could potentially increase their ability to influence public opinion, thereby legitimizing and increasing the marketing awareness of their respective organizations.

Nonprofit organizations such as disabled sport organizations must make certain for future purposes that they will not be a financial liability and will be capable of developing fund

sources for grass-root and entry-level athletic programs and events. As they conduct a SWOT analysis, each decision maker should immediately begin the process of integration to enhance their services (Paley, 2001). By doing so the organization may better be able to develop its' strengths, overcome a weakness and prepare itself for any future opportunities or threats.

The authors are hopeful that this investigation will contribute to disabled sport organizations source of marketing awareness and future viability. The authors' caution against generalizing the results to other non-profit organizations due to the relatively small number of disabled sports organizations in this investigation. However, it is important to note that these are the only DSOs recognized as United States Olympic Committee (USOC) member organizations. To expand this area of study, the authors encourage investigations in the SWOT analysis of state affiliated disabled sport organizations such as Special Olympics.

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TABLES

TABLE 1

DISABLED SPORT ORGANIZATION STRATEGIC MARKETING PLAN METHODS

	DSO1	DSO2	DSO3	DSO4	DSO5	DSO6	DSO7
Low Public Awareness	X	X	X		X	X	X
Poor Market Value	X	X			X		
Poor Donor Tracking			X				X
Unsophisticated Marketing		X				X	
Limited staff							X
Poor fundraising	X	X	X	X			X
No weakness				X			
Collaborate with other DSOs	X	X	X	X		X	

TABLE 2

DISABLED SPORTS ORGANIZATION'S STRATEGIC MARKETING STRENGTHS

	DSO1	DSO2	DSO3	DSO4	DSO5	DSO6	DSO7
1 year plan		X					
3-4 year plan						X	
Own 4 year plan	X		X	X	X		
USOC 4 year plan							X

TABLE 3

DISABLED SPORTS ORGANIZATION'S STRATEGIC MARKETING WEAKNESSES

	DSO1	DSO2	DSO3	DSO4	DSO5	DSO6	DSO7
Professional Staff	X	X	X				
Affiliation with Olympics	X	X			X	X	
Board Members	X	X		X			
Collaborate with other DSOs	X	X		X	X		
Market Studies	X						
Name Recognition	X	X	X	X			X
Corporate Endorsers	X	X					
Celebrity Endorsers	X	X	X	X	X		

**TABLE 4
DISABLED SPORTS ORGANIZATIONS MARKETING OPPORTUNITIES**

	DSO1	DSO2	DSO3	DSO4	DSO5	DSO6	DSO7
Educate Public	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Joint Marketing		X			X		
Market Appeal to Disabled	X			X			
Collaborate with Non-Disabled	X				X	X	X
Collaborate with other DSO's			X		X	X	X
Target Federal Sources						X	X
Conduct More Events				X			X

**TABLE 5
DISABLED SPORT ORGANIZATIONS MARKETING THREATS**

	DSO1	DSO2	DSO3	DSO4	DSO5	DSO6	DSO7
Competition with Other DSO's	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Bias Against Disabled						X	
Lack of Qualified Staff					X		X
Not Enough Funds Available	X	X	X		X	X	X
Fragmentation					X		X
Marketing Myth	X	X	X			X	