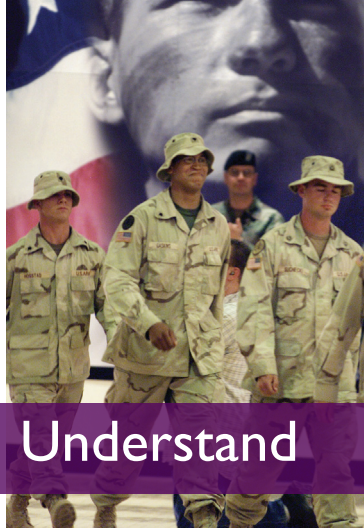




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OPERATION DIPLOMA

An initiative of the Military Family Research Institute at Purdue University

Twenty Questions to Think About When Starting a Student Veterans' Organization

Adapted from http://www.forbes.com/2007/11/21/walmart-microsoft-apple-ent-manage-cx_bn_1121importantquestions.html

1. What is your value proposition?

This is the single most important question of the bunch. If you can't explain -- in three, jargon-free sentences or less -- why student veterans should join your organization, you do not have a value proposition. Without a need, there is no incentive for student veterans to join. And without members, you have no organization.

2. Does your organization and its offerings address the needs of its intended constituency?

Many founders of organizations fall in love with the concept of the organization without confirming that there's clear need for the organization and its offerings. Their assumption is that any organization with a unique set of offerings will succeed because of novelty; maybe there's a good reason why such an organization does not exist or has not been able to be succeed previously (the constituency doesn't understand or want to commit because of failing to meet their needs).

3. What differentiates your product from competitors'?

Few organizations can rely on--let alone afford--clever marketing schemes to separate themselves from other organizations. If you want to win over members, you need to offer something tangibly valuable that other organizations and university services don't.

4. How big is the threat of new entrants?

If you succeed at starting a student organization, you can bet competition isn't far behind. If not a direct competitor, then there are other activities that become competitors on time and resources. Think about how you can build a loyal following before that happens.

5. How much start-up capital do you need?

A number of organizations fail because they didn't have enough resources to make a good go at it. Figure out how much you think you need, and then add realistic cushion.

6. How much cash do you need to survive the early years?

In case you didn't pay attention to the previous question, take this one to heart. It doesn't matter how much money your organization might make down the road if you can't get a critical mass of members. Plenty of organizations run out of cash before the good times kick in. Three words: Mind the cash.

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7. How will you finance the organization?

Grants will only get you so far. Think about how you can bootstrap your business, that is, get revenue from activities and put it back into the organization. Raising money is difficult and distracting. Remember to match the timing of cash inflows from your assets and the outflows to cover liabilities. A mismatch can sting.

8. What are your strengths?

Figure out what your organization wants to be good at and what it wants to be known for. Then stick to it. An obvious notion, perhaps, but plenty of zealous organizations can lose their way--especially when the world seems so full of possibilities.

9. What are your weaknesses?

Stick to core competencies and find trusted partners to handle the rest. Wasting resources on non-core activities makes your organization mediocre.

10. What is the role of the university?

Convincing student veterans to become members is tough enough without the university giving you a hard time. Make sure to consider how the organization will work within university guidelines and policies.

11. How sizeable can you make your organization?

It's no fun to be in an organization with few members, which means everyone needs to kick in more to get things done. The more members, the less one individual has to commit both in terms of time and money, which frees up members to do what they want.

12. How should you sell your organization?

There is no one-size-fits-all solution to wooing members. Whatever approach, make sure it aligns with your overall business strategy and meets university guidelines and policies.

13. How should you market your organization?

New organizations have to get the word out, but they also can go broke doing it. There is no one rule of thumb for how to market a student veteran organization, but here are six marketing strategies for your strong consideration:

Survey the landscape.

Too few organizations bother to define the market--and its willingness to pay--to be a member of an organization. Think about willingness to pay as both money and time investment. Consider online surveys and email to see what prospective members are thinking.

Get friendly with Google.

After you've shelled out some money and effort for a user-friendly Web site, budget more for getting noticed by the big search engines like Google and Yahoo!.

Buff your reputation with a board of advisers.

Organizations are short on a lot of things--including credibility. One way to buff up your profile (and even raise some money) is to create a reputable board of advisers. Also get involved with statewide and national organizations to learn practices and afford networking opportunities.

Call customers to action.

Not all e-mail marketing campaigns are created equal. Those that give prospective members a call to action will attract attention and get a response.

Create a community.

Word of mouth is still the most powerful form of marketing for organizations. Lure customers online by launching a blog where they can network, share information and hopefully talk about how cool your organization is. Blogs are generally inexpensive but you will burn man-hours updating and monitoring the site.

Test and test some more.

No one hits on the perfect marketing strategy on their first try. Instead of placing all your bets on one advertisement or other type of marketing campaign, try concurrently testing two or three strategies on targeted groups of students. Find which ones work and then focus on using those.

14. Does the organization and its offerings scale?

Bill Gates plowed piles of money into developing the first copy of Microsoft Office. The beauty: Each additional copy of that software program costs next to nothing to produce. That's called scale--and it's the difference between flat membership and growing membership. What models don't scale? Think service functions, where the need for people grows along with the number of activities provided.

15. What are your financial projections?

You can't lead if you don't have a destination. Two critical milestones: 1) the point where more cash is coming into the organization than going out in a given period, and 2) the point at which you finally recuperate your cumulative initial investment. Financial projections should be reasonable. Paint too rosy a picture and future funding will disappear.

16. What price will members willing to pay in both time and money?

Get this answer wrong and you could leave money on the table--or worse, send members to other organizations. Here are six steps for pricing your product:

Step 1: Can you brand it?

Setting a price starts with a basic question: Is yours a branded or generic product? If it's generic, stop reading, charge the market rate and run your operation as lean as possible to preserve what little profit margin remains. If you think your product has unique features that you can charge more for, read on.

Step 2: Do qualitative research.

Start to hone in on the right price by running focus groups to get a sense of what members are willing to pay. Ask about what they like about the organization and what they don't; that way, you will know if your marketing message will hit home. Don't ask them directly what they would pay for membership (customers tend to low-ball their answers), but instead ask how much they think it should such an organization exist. Two identical focus groups will help you to confirm your findings.

Step 3: Do quantitative research.

You've done the soft stuff--now it's time for some hard numbers. This step involves in-person or Internet surveys. Sample questions: What price do you pay for various student organizations? Would you be willing to pay a higher price for this organization with certain characteristics?

Step 4: Plan your attack.

Before you set your price, decide how you want to attack the market. Or, do you charge a higher price and capture a smaller, but perhaps more committed--and profitable--customer base?

Step 5: Pull the trigger.

Take what information you have, marry it with your strategy and pick your price.

Step 6: Don't let success go to your head.

So the organization is growing and you figure: Why not raise the price and bank a few more bucks? Be careful: It's much harder to jack prices than it is to lower them; indeed, you could lose members and send prospective members running the other way. If membership numbers are sluggish, consider lowering the price--but not by too much. Slash prices and you could tarnish your brand's image permanently.

17. What is organization intellectual property and why should we care?

Think about anything that is unique to the organization. If yes, that represents a unique opportunity for elevating the organization and could draw in good revenue. For example, the American Cancer Society has its Run for Life campaign, which is nationwide; it draws a lot of attention and revenue.

18. How do you keep the help happy?

Attracting and retaining talented membership is critical to sustainable organizations. Give careful consideration to succession planning.

19. How committed are you to making this happen?

Fair warning: If you want to run the show, get ready to give everything--and then some.

20. What is your end game?

Running an organization is not easy. Ask yourself the following six questions.

Why go big at all?

Mapping out your long-term goals for the organization is critical before you decide to kick into high gear. Smaller organizations are easier to manage than large organizations.

Are you inspired by creativity or more process-oriented?

Many individuals start organizations on raw creativity. They envision a new niche--a brand new world even. But such imagination can get in the way when it comes time to install--and live within--the systems and processes necessary to accommodate growth.

Do you like speaking in public?

Organizations of any significant size need a public face. Individuals who thrive on public performances--weekly meetings, public sessions--have an easier time than those who prefer to stay out of the spotlight. (If public speaking isn't your forte but you still want to grow, find a confident substitute who can sell your story.)

Are you a consensus builder?

In most cases, the bigger your organizations, the more input you need from those around you. That means being willing and able to marshal consensus. Individuals with a my-way-or-the-highway mentality should think about staying small.

If you say you need it on your desk by 9 a.m., will it get done?

Anybody can issue orders, but leaders of growing organizations have to go a step further: They must command a certain degree of respect. As the stakes rise, you need a few drill sergeants on board. Not willing to sacrifice a little camaraderie to reach new heights? Put a cap on your growth plans.

Can you delegate?

The bigger your organization, the less time you'll have. If you can't delegate, forget about growing. Also remember that school work comes first.

About the Operation Diploma Initiative at the Military Family Research Institute

The MFRI Operation Diploma Initiative offers a unique opportunity to generate new knowledge about veterans' experiences in higher education and to develop strategies that will enhance the experiences of student service members and veterans. Operation Diploma and MFRI are funded by the Lilly Endowment.

For More Information

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