



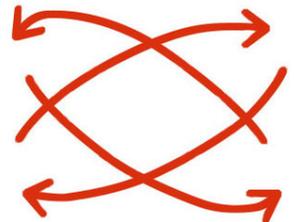
# Never Let a “Good” Pandemic Go to Waste

By Chris Nunes and Donna Kuethe

*The following article by GP RED Operating Board member Chris Nunes and GP RED Executive Director Donna Kuethe was published in April of 2021 in KPRO (Kansas Park and Recreation Association) Today. Reprinted here by permission.*

It’s hard to look at a global pandemic and think of it in positive terms. However, challenges are opportunities for growth. About a year after the world of Parks and Recreation as we knew it came crashing down while COVID 19 expanded its reach, Parks and Recreation professionals have become experts in all things Pandemic related – social distancing, mask wearing, sanitation procedures, health screenings and much more. In addition, we have continued to engage our communities, creatively, uniquely providing high-quality parks and recreation programs, services and facilities in spite of the Pandemic. Our outdoor facilities have shown increased usage, and many of the ways we have learned to reach our customers during lockdown have resulted in the potential to reach more people. The challenge for 2021 and beyond will be the impact and opportunities the Covid 19 Pandemic has provided. The wake of the Pandemic affords professionals to take lessons learned and implement these on a move forward basis. These “lessons” include being flexible and agile, understanding our fragile financial realities, managing the ever-changing consumer confidence, and ensuing access to all in our programs and services. Professionals need to “seize the day” to turn challenges into opportunities and make our services more efficient, effective, and more relevant to our communities. Our delivery of recreation services may be changed forever and for the better.

**FLEXIBILITY AND AGILITY** - Over the course of the past year, there have been many challenges that COVID 19 has brought. From unemployment and furloughs, the long-term negative health impacts of the virus; the loss of revenue for tax-supported entities; to perceptions of how COVID 19 impacts an individual’s personal and family safety. All of these factors impact how, and if, people will choose to consume our services. While there have been numerous challenges there also have been countless positives. There has been an increase in the use of our outdoor spaces (parks, trails), golf, and tennis has seen a bump in popularity, virtual and e-programs have been launched and new cohort programming methods have been used to ensure our residents are safe. During the early onset of the pandemic, we relaxed our thought processes on how programs and facilities should operate, which in turn created numerous relevant programs and services. This flexibility and agility need to be harnessed and enabled as we see the end of the Pandemic to make it a “standard operational procedure”.



**FINANCIAL REALITIES** - The National Recreation and Parks Association (NRPA) reported in early 2021 that “park and recreation budgets will face cuts of 25 percent or more in their fiscal year 2021–2022 budgets, and substantial cuts in fiscal year 2022–2023 budgets”. While there is a forecasted decrease in tax revenue (sales, property, income, etc), professionals need to continue to grasp a better understanding

of the financial realities of their agency. One method in which to do this is to implement a cost recovery program, which is a necessary best practice strategy for agencies. This strategy blends the concepts of who



benefits from the program (community versus individual) and where the cost should be allocated (community versus individual). Overall, the goal with a cost recovery model is to find the right sport for the community that balances the traditional social services parks and recreation model with elements of an entrepreneur/business model. From a long-term perspective this provides a critical review of programs, facilities and offerings, including a thorough review of expenses and models of operation. Furthermore, it has the ability to create new programs that are in high demand and have positive revenue margins for which that positive revenue can be used for higher community need programs that the tax subsidy can no longer support.

**CONSUMER CONFIDENCE** - Consumer confidence is defined as a consumer's feelings about current and future economic conditions. The individual personalizes feelings about their ability to pay based on what is happening to themselves. Have they been laid off, have they been furloughed (days, weeks, months) or have they not been financially impacted? Recreation spending, for the most part, is discretionary and an individual's ability to pay may have been impacted by the Pandemic. Consumer confidence is also related to an individual's perception of their personal safety. At this point in time, consumers can be segmented into three different groups- Red, Yellow and Green. Red are those are not willing to participate based on their significant concerns about COVID -19 and/or individuals with significant health issues, i.e., immunocompromised or those in the high-risk age categories – our seniors. Yellow are those who are willing to go out but are more cautious about the programs and services used. They are asking questions about cleaning protocols, social distancing, mask wearing, etc. Green are those who have or are willing to accept the risks being in public and groups and are willing to comply with necessary protocols. Overall, professionals now and



into the future need to understand consumer confidence varies greatly at this moment and will continue into the future. A professional must examine market segmentation which includes, among other things, consumer confidence and then develop programs and services taking these concepts into account.

**ACCESS FOR ALL** - Access for all is a fundamental component which has roots in the founding of our profession dating back to the late 1800's. Overall, public parks and recreation services should be equally accessible and available to all people regardless of income level, ethnicity, gender, ability, or age. The Pandemic has brought to the forefront that not all services are being provided equitably to all members of the public. Further exacerbating the issue is that often time our programming aimed at meeting this need group is not innovative or relevant to the respective community. Through the Pandemic the professional has realized developing programs and services for community members physical, social, emotional wellness needed is paramount. The Pandemic can afford the professional the opportunity to not only think "outside the box" but to "destroy the box" to make sure all programming, no matter the demographic, is brilliant and relevant, thus further ensuring the benefits of parks and recreation are realized for all community members who use and need our services.



The title of the article is not meant to diminish the impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on individuals or communities. The steps outlined above are meant to provide an optimistic view of the pandemic and how the parks and recreation profession can use the lessons learned to do things that were not possible to do before based on conventional wisdom, red tape and bureaucracy. In the long term these, and other techniques, that have been used during the pandemic will enable our services to be truly relevant to the public.

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