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IMPROVING DONATION MANAGEMENT AT FINGER LAKES REUSE

By

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B.A., Binghamton University State University of New York, *Magna Cum Laude*, 2008

CAPSTONE PROJECT

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters in Public
Administration in the College of Community and Public Affairs
Binghamton University State University of New York
2012

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Accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Masters in Public Administration
in the Graduate School of Binghamton University
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2012

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Dedication

To my wonderful and brilliant husband Zach, who provided immeasurable guidance, and reassurance, and support.

Acknowledgements

I would like to take the opportunity to thank the amazing people that have helped me throughout my time in the MPA program. Dr. Lambright, thank you for always being receptive, encouraging, and honest in your feedback. Your support and guidance have helped me grow personally and professionally and it was truly an honor to have you as my advisor. Dr. Campbell, thank you so much for your generous advice and guidance on my career interests.

I would especially like to thank Diane Cohen, Executive Director of Finger Lakes ReUse, and her staff and volunteers for their help in the process of this project. Nina Piccoli, Louise Henrie, and all the workers who logged phone calls for three months, I cannot thank you enough for your diligence and enthusiasm for this project.

Finally, I want to acknowledge my friends and colleagues within the program for all the good times we shared this semester and throughout the past year and half. It has been an honor to get to know each of you, and I am inspired by your level of professionalism and dedication to public service.

Executive Summary

Finger Lakes ReUse (FLR) has been steadily growing since opening the doors to its ReUse Center in 2008. Part of this growth has been an increase in material donations that are resold in The ReUse Center, a secondhand store of building materials, household goods, furniture, and electronics. Managing the daily flow of donations is challenging due to limited space and other constraints. Yet, FLR must address its donation management processes as the sales from donations cover organizational expenses and allow the organization to maintain financial sustainability..

This project seeks to identify how FLR can increase its revenues and sustainability by identifying (1) the most requested, purchased, and donated items, (2) how much revenue is lost due to space limitations, and (3) the strengths and weaknesses of the donation management process from the perspective of workers, donors, and customers. In order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the current donation management process as well as perspectives of workers, donors, and customers, I used a mixed-methods research design including secondary data analysis and semi-structured interviews.

Through descriptive statistics and thematic analysis, I identified four key findings: (1) there are clear similarities between items customers want to purchase, items customers want to donate, and items customers purchase, (2) valuable donations are rarely turned away, (3) interview respondents identified a number of weaknesses with FLR's donation management, and (4) FLR workers have differing ideas about how the donation intake process could be improved. This capstone makes recommendations which will assist FLR in improving its donation management system including (1) hiring a material donations coordinator, (2) focusing on obtaining a building materials warehouse, and (3) modifying the pricing model.

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Problem Definition

Finger Lakes ReUse (FLR), Inc., located in Ithaca, NY, is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to enhance community, economy and environment through reuse. FLR's reuse activities reduce waste and preserve natural resources, provide quality, affordable materials for the community, pay staff a living wage, and create opportunities for low-income and underserved populations to learn valuable job skills. FLR simultaneously aims to advance environmental sustainability and reduce the state of urban and rural poverty in the region.

Since opening its doors in 2008, Finger Lakes ReUse has seen exponential growth of its three major programs: The ReUse Center, Deconstruction Services, and the eCenter. The ReUse Center is a drop off and retail location focused on reclamation and reuse of furniture, housewares, and building materials. The Deconstruction Services Program is a green alternative to demolition that allows the reuse of up to 90% of deconstructed building materials. Lastly, the eCenter is a computer reuse program that collaborates with local organizations to teach job skills through refurbishing electronics for reuse. Demand for FLR's materials and services are demonstrated by the increase in retail sales and services, as well as the increase in received donations (Finger Lakes ReUse, 2011).

Finger Lakes ReUse receives material donations from individuals, businesses and organizations in Tompkins County, which are then sold in The ReUse Center to cover organizational expenses. Each year, progressively more donations come through FLR's doors at the Triphammer Mall, yet the amount of physical space to store, sort, and sell items is limited. According to a 2006 study of selected US reuse programs, most reuse centers require at least 30,000 square feet of space, while FLR is currently working within 13,350 square feet (Finger Lakes ReUse, 2006). Between 2011 and 2012, FLR was forced to work within even less space as

it closed its eCenter storefront due to difficult lease negotiations. For more than six months, the eCenter shared space in the adjacent 7,000 square foot ReUse Center. After several unsuccessful attempts at finding a larger facility for FLR's activities, Executive Director Diane Cohen renegotiated with the building's landlord to reopen the old eCenter storefront in early 2012. However, space is still an ongoing concern and a significant limitation for the organization.

Limited space is not the only challenge FLR is facing in managing the donation process. There are several donation streams the organization must handle and process in different ways. For example, electronics must be tested before they are sold and they go to the eCenter before being processed, while furniture and household goods follow another protocol, and building materials another. Further complicating donation management issues is that opportunities to accept donations are occasionally missed because there is no standardized intake protocol (D. Cohen, personal communication, July 16, 2012). When pressed for time, some staff and volunteers reject a donation if they believe accepting it is more trouble than it is worth, whereas others may go out of their way to accept all possible donations.

The amount of donated materials continues to increase, evidenced by the fact that FLR received 68 tons of donated materials in the first six months of 2012, a 20% increase over the previous year (Finger Lakes ReUse, 2012). Yet the organization was forced to refuse donations due to space limitations, including more than 100 pallets of brick (worth nearly \$500,000), high-quality furniture from 200 apartments, and office furniture from a large municipal department with over 160 desks plus file cabinets, bookshelves, and chairs (Finger Lakes ReUse, 2010). Turning away valuable items like these hurts the organization's financial stability, although the aggregate value of the donations that are refused is unknown.

Because of the lack of space, different donation streams, and a lack of a standardized donation management protocol, FLR misses opportunities to generate more revenue through sales. The organization's financial stability is reliant on the resale of such donations. FLR's 2011 annual budget was nearly \$700,000, 60 percent of which came from the sale of donations (D. Cohen, personal communication, July 31, 2012). The ReUse Center revenues are what allow Finger Lakes ReUse to cover its expenses and provide essential services to the community, such as quality, affordable materials, living wage jobs, and job skills training. Over time, missed opportunities to increase sales may affect the organization's sustainability.

Donation management protocols are crucial to the performance of organizations that rely on the sale of donations. However, organizational capacity must be addressed before systems can be developed (Letts, Ryan, & Grossman, 1999). Developing protocols requires formalizing once informal systems for carrying out activities and can be an "enormous effort" (Letts et al., p. 21). Organizations that rely on donations for their long-term success could benefit from assessing capacity and needs in order to set strategic goals, such as to bring in a certain amount of revenue through donations annually. Standardizing donation management protocols will help organizations like FLR achieve long term financial independence from outside funders.

Conducting an analysis of FLR's donation management activities will provide opportunities for organizational improvement. The findings are relevant to other organizations that accept donations, such as other reuse organizations, food pantries, and thrift stores. The information could help such organizations direct their own activities and goals and develop a best practice for donation management protocols.

Research Questions

Finger Lakes ReUse needs to maximize its revenues in order to become more financially independent. In order to do this, it must address its donation management processes. This project seeks to identify how FLR can increase its revenues by answering:

- (1) What are the most requested, purchased, and donated items, and how much revenue is lost due to space limitations?
- (2) What are the strengths and weaknesses of the donation management process from the perspective of workers, donors, and customers?

Conceptual Framework

Finger Lakes ReUse' ReUse Center needs a more effective and efficient donation process. In order to make improvements to its donation process and allow the organization to become more self-sustaining, this literature review will focus on two bodies of literature: characteristics of charity retail operations and characteristics of donation management.

Charity Retail Operations

The charity retail sector encompasses retail stores that exist to raise funds for their parent nonprofit organizations (Chattoe, 2000; Croft, 2003; Gregson, Crew, & Brooks, 2002; Horne, 2000; Horne & Broadbridge, 1995; Maddrell, 2000; Parsons, 2002, 2004a, 2004b) and includes such large chains as Goodwill, the Salvation Army, and Habitat for Humanity's ReStore, as well as hundreds of smaller independent stores (Parsons, 2002). Parent organizations provide charitable services to a particular target population. For example, Goodwill uses revenues from its retail operations to provide job training for disadvantaged and at-risk communities, among other activities. The majority of charity retail operations sell secondhand items that have been donated by the public, such as clothing, furniture, and household goods. Charity retailers strive to

become self-sustaining by maximizing store revenues that fund program activities and organizational operations (Gregson, Crew, & Brooks, 2002). Becoming self-sustaining can be challenging for many reasons as mentioned later in this review.

Charity retail stores are different from for-profit retail stores in a few significant ways. First, charity stores are predominantly staffed by unpaid volunteers. Second, the mission of a charity store is to provide funds for charitable activities, while the goal of for-profit retail stores is to make profits for shareholders. Third, charity retailers deal predominantly with secondhand goods received from consumers (Chattoe, 2000).

Marketing is a major concern for charity retailers and involves concerns such as physical space, pricing, competition and donor loyalty (Corstjen & Doyle, 1981; Gregson, Crew, & Brooks, 2002). Charity retail stores need adequate space to sort and price donations (Grant, 2010; Kapp, 2012), as well as retail space to display items. Limited space for displaying merchandise can negatively impact sales (Corstjen & Doyle, 1981), and valuable shelf space is often cluttered with items that do not sell well (Gregson et al., 2002). Careful consideration must be given to pricing not only to create sufficient revenue, but also to keep stock moving to make room for new inventory (Parsons, 2004a). Part of the challenge in pricing is that raising prices in an effort to maximize revenues can hurt the low-income target populations that charity retailers intend to help the most by becoming too expensive (Joo, Stoeberl, & Kwon, 2007).

Charity retail operations must compete with other nonprofit retailers and for-profit retailers for donations and sales (Hibbert, Horne, & Tagg, 2005). The informal, idiosyncratic nature of the secondhand market dictates that consumers donate to and buy goods from a range of intermediaries, including other consumers, thrift stores, antique stores and auctioneers

(Hibbert, Horne, & Tagg, 2005). Donation incentives can help charity retailers maintain a steady flow of donations which may lead to increased revenue through sales (Bennett, 2007). Incentives such as money-off coupons, premium offers, linked-product gifts, and prize drawings increase donation amounts among established donors, and encourage new, “deal-prone” individuals to give (Bennett, 2007, p. 277). Maintaining donor loyalty is also important as it ensures a consistent flow of goods, yet marketing has little effect on donors as they tend to be consistent in the patterns in which they contribute goods (Hibbert, Horne, & Tagg, 2005).

Most charity retailers operate their stores with some mix of volunteer and paid labor. To keep overhead low, volunteer labor is preferred over paid staff, but volunteers often lack skills in stock control and rotation, electronic checkout systems, and security measures needed in more professional stores (Maddrell, 2000). Paid workers usually supplement volunteers, and tend to be used by more professional charity retail operations (Broadbridge & Parsons, 2003). Broadbridge & Horne (1994) argue that professionalization of the industry is critical, stating that charity stores and volunteers must be organized “efficiently and professionally so as to provide consistent consumer perception and trade” (p. 435).

Characteristics of Donation Management

Nonprofit organizations that distribute or sell donations are faced with the daily reality of managing irregular donations (Alexander, 2008; Kapp, 2012; Joo, Stoeberl, & Kwon, 2007; Tarasuk & Eakin, 2005). Organizations that manage donations include (but are not limited to) charity retailers, food banks, homeless shelters, and emergency service organizations. The flow of incoming donations is almost always unpredictable. Consequently, nonprofit organizations in these sectors must be adaptable (Broadbridge & Parsons, 2003; Gregson, Crew, & Brooks, 2002)

and able to improvise (Kapp, 2012). At the same time, nonprofits must also know how and when to say “no” (Grant, 2010). Refusing donations is part of a delicate balancing act between avoiding unnecessary work and maintaining a good relationship with future donors. Having a donation policy can prevent becoming overburdened with donations (Alexander, 2008; Edwards, 2009; Grant, 2010; Tarasuk & Eakin, 2005).

Donation management involves handling and sorting large quantities of items. As described by Chattoe (1999), “[charity retail] workers must collect goods from donors, identify, sort, repair, clean, test and otherwise prepare them for sale, price them, put them on display, monitor their sale and ultimately deal with the disposal of unwanted items” (p. 157). Special challenges involve electrical equipment testing, which requires skilled workers, and transporting furniture or other large items (Chattoe, 2000). Customers of charity shops are so diverse (Chattoe, 2000; Parsons, 2002) that while some would appreciate the time spent on clean, organized, and tested products, others would be turned off (Chattoe, 2000).

The organizational costs of managing donations are high. Processing donations involves a great deal of staff time as well as materials and tools to repair, price, and display items for sale (Andrews & Richey, 2012). Many charity retailers depend on volunteers, who can be unreliable and involve high levels of training and supervision (Broadbridge & Parsons, 2003). Paid labor reduces the need to supervise and manage volunteers, but requires the organization to have sufficient revenue. Donated items that are accepted but not resold must be disposed of, whether to the landfill or to a materials recycling organization. The costs of disposal involve time, landfill tipping fees, transportation costs, and other recycling costs.

Research has identified strategies that charity retailers and donation managers can use to help them address donation management challenges. For example, Alexander (2008) and Tarasuk & Eakin (2005) argue that streamlining logistics will help, while Kapp (2012) believes the right approach is improvisation. Streamlining involves setting up processes that are followed by everyone in the organization, thus reducing the time and cost in sorting and handling donations. Improvising embodies a mentality of flexibility—the understanding that every day will bring new challenges and they must be dealt with as they come. Based on the literature, limited storage and retail space is a common issue. Thus, improving donation management systems can help charity retailers better work within the limited spaces they have available. The literature also suggests that in order to maintain sustainability, charity retailers must assess their pricing strategies.

Methodology

This project examines the strengths and weaknesses of Finger Lakes ReUse' donation management process through a mixed-methods research design. In order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the current donation management process as well as perspectives of workers, donors, and customers, I conducted secondary data analysis and semi-structured interviews. To ensure the highest levels of ethical practice, I obtained approval from the Institutional Review Board of the Human Subjects Research Review Committee at Binghamton University prior to data collection (see Appendix A for approval letter).

Data Collection

No single research design can guarantee a study is valid and reliable (Schutt, 1999). However, the use of triangulation—multiple methods to study one research question—allows for a more accurate measure of the questions being studied (Schutt, 1999). The quantitative data collected in this project answers the first research question, but not the second. The qualitative data enables me to answer the second research question as well as provides context for both research questions. Integrating these two data collection methods strengthens the credibility and validity of the findings.

Secondary data analysis. Secondary data is data that has already been collected. This study uses data that was collected from 706 phone calls received by FLR workers from August 2, to October 30, 2012. All FLR workers who answered the telephone during the time period logged information about each call in a single Google form, called the Phone Call Log. The main purpose of the Phone Call Log was to identify the reasons customers, donors, and the public contacted the organization. Some reasons included: the customer was looking for an item, wanted to donate an item, or had a question about a program or service (for a full list of the Phone Call Log Reasons and frequency of calls, see Appendix F). The aspects of the Phone Call Log relevant to this study include the items customers were looking for and the items customers wanted to donate. I exported the Phone Call Log from the Google form into an Excel spreadsheet for analysis. Before analyzing the data, more information was needed about the value of items offered for donation. This additional information was collected by FLR staff during October, 2012 and sent in a separate Excel spreadsheet. The additional data included the estimated value of donations offered, and the estimated amount of donations refused by the organization during the Phone Call Log period.

Semi-structured telephone interviews with donors & customers. Semi-structured telephone interviews are a type of qualitative research, which consist of open-ended questions to gather in-depth information on a subject. I conducted seven semi-structured telephone interviews (four with FLR donors, and three with FLR customers) between October 21, and November 1, 2012, to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the donation process from the perspective of the respective groups. The target population for these interview were individuals 18 and older who had either donated to FLR or been a customer of FLR in the past.

To identify the donor group, a FLR staff member used the organization's donor database to identify small and large donors. The staff member further limited the list by excluding individuals who had donated a large number of building materials from the deconstruction of a building, because such donors do not typically drop off their donated items. I was given a list of 50 donors and their contact information. Out of 50 donors, 24 had telephone numbers listed in FLR's database. Using the rest of the names, I searched the White Pages for further numbers, arriving at a total 38 individuals for my donor sample.

To identify the customer group, I was given access to the organization's database of more than 4,000 customers. I limited the list to customers spending over \$50 and then randomly selected 80 customers using an online random number generator. This group was further narrowed by whether each had a telephone number listed in the database. I ended with 57 customers in my customer sample.

The major topics discussed in the donor interviews included reasons for donating to FLR, types of items donated, typical donation habits, and suggestions for improvements to the donation management process. The customer interview questions were similar and focused on

reasons for shopping at FLR, types of items bought, and typical shopping habits. Each interviewee was informed of their rights as a participant prior to questioning. Interview questions can be found in Appendix D.

Semi-structured worker interviews. I also conducted five semi-structured interviews with FLR staff and volunteers on October 23, 2012. These interviews focused on the strengths and weaknesses of the donation process. I spoke with both paid employees and full-time volunteers whose daily work involves processing and/or handling donations. The volunteers were Work Experience Participants from the Department of Social Services. Having worked with FLR staff and volunteers previously over the summer, I felt comfortable requesting their participation in interviews, and I received a 100% participation rate. All interviews were conducted in a private area at FLR and audio recorded with the consent of each interviewee. The interviews ranged from 30 minutes to an hour depending on length of response and utilized several open-ended questions (see Appendix D), which were based on issues outlined in the problem statement and the literature review. I used the same semi-structured format and questions for each interview to increase consistency and allow me to compare the responses of different interviewees.

Data Analysis

The quantitative data generated from the Phone Call Log was helpful in understanding the scope and value of donations offered, the scope of items being requested, and the amount of revenue missed from refusing donations. I used descriptive statistics to determine the most requested, purchased, and donated items, and the amount of revenue that was missed due to the rejection of donations.

Worker interviews were recorded with an audio recording device, and I took handwritten notes during the interview sessions. I also took handwritten notes on the telephone interviews with donors and customers. After each interview, I organized my notes and began to search for patterns within and between the interviews. Throughout the process, I identified problems and concepts mentioned by the participants, which allowed me to test my insights against new observations and develop a model for interpreting the data. I listed the ideas reflected in my notes and diagrammed relationships among concepts. After thematically coding problems and concepts, I checked for the frequency and distribution of occurrences. In the final analysis, I carefully checked my model against my notes and looked for negative evidence that would suggest the model was incorrect.

Limitations

While there are advantages to using secondary data, there is always a concern with the quality and comprehensiveness of secondary data (Schutt, 1999). With the Phone Call Log, it is unknown whether 100% of workers participated and whether 100% of phone calls were logged. Further, information may have been entered incorrectly into the phone log. There is no way of knowing how much data was incorrect or missing. Additionally, the estimated value of donation offers is highly variable, since many refused donations were never seen by FLR workers. Employees and volunteers relied on verbal descriptions and median prices of like-items from the point-of-sale system to provide estimates of donation values. Lastly, the phone call data was collected in a relatively short amount of time, which may limit how reliably the data reflects phone calls during other time periods.

There are also limitations with my study's qualitative data. The sample of FLR donor and customer participants is not representative of all donors and customers of FLR. As mentioned earlier, the donor group was pre-selected by a FLR staff member, and customers were limited to those who had spent over \$50. Further, the majority of interviewees are likely to be more involved with FLR than their average customers and donors. I was not able to provide an incentive for donors and customers I interviewed, and thus there was little motivation to participate outside of altruism or loyalty to the organization.

Limitations with the worker interviews concern the extent to which interviewees were completely honest and open in their responses. The presence of an interviewer can make it difficult for interviewees to respond honestly, and in this case, my involvement with the organization could have posed concerns for some workers. However, my questions did not focus on personal or sensitive topics so it is likely that the interviewees were honest in their responses.

Findings

Based upon descriptive statistics and thematic analysis, I identified four key findings which I will describe in detail in this section. First, there are clear similarities between items customers want to purchase, items customers want to donate, and items customers actually purchase. Second, valuable donations are rarely turned away. Third, interview respondents identified a number of weaknesses with FLR's donation management process. Fourth, FLR workers have different ideas about the level and type of staffing needed for donation management.

Finding 1: There are clear similarities between items customers want to purchase, items customers actually purchase, and items offered for donation.

In analyzing the phone call data collected from August 2, to October 30, 2012, building materials made up the majority of items callers were looking to purchase as well as to donate. Further, building materials made up the largest portion of sales revenue according to FLR's year-to-date operations report. See Table 1 for a breakdown of the top three most looked for, most offered, and most purchased material categories.

Table 1. Breakdown of top 3 material categories

	Most Looked For (% of phone inquiries)	Most Donation Offers (% of phone inquiries)	Most Purchased (% of sales)
#1	Building Materials (49.6%)	Building Materials (29.2%)	Building Materials (38.8%)
#2	Computers & Peripherals (18.8%)	Furniture (25.9%)	Furniture (19.2%)
#3	Furniture (17%)	Household Goods (15.7%)	Computers & Peripherals (17%)

Out of the 224 total phone calls looking for items, building materials accounted for 49.6% of these calls, followed by computers & peripherals (18.8%), furniture (17%), household goods (8%), and home electronics (6.7%). I further analyzed the subcategories of building materials: of the 111 phone calls looking for building materials, the top three most looked for building material subcategories were appliances (23.4%), lumber (13.5%), and forms of heating, radiators, or furnaces (11.7%).

Of 163 phone calls offering donations, building materials made up 29.2% of these calls, followed by furniture (25.9%), household goods (15.7%), computers & peripherals (14.6%), and home electronics (14.6%). The top three subcategories of building materials offered are doors

and windows (31.7%), appliances such as stoves, refrigerators, or washing machines (14.3%), and plumbing related items such as sinks, tubs, or faucets (14.3%). To identify the most purchased items, I consulted FLR's September 2012 Operations Report, which includes a breakdown of year-to-date sales. According to the Operations Report, building materials accounted for 39% of sales, followed by furniture (19%), computers & peripherals (17%), household goods (16%), home electronics (6%), and services (3%).

These findings show that building materials are both in the greatest supply and demand. Donors offer this category of materials more than other categories, and customers look for building materials more than any other category. Lastly, customers spend more money on building materials than any other category.

Finding 2: Valuable donations are rarely turned away due to space limitations.

One of the issues mentioned in the Problem Definition was that FLR does not have adequate space to store, sort, and sell donated items. As described in Finding 1, the majority of donations are building materials, which tend to be large and take up a lot of space. However, despite FLR's lack of space, all five workers interviewed said they rarely turn away items due to space. According to one worker, "Most of what's rejected is worthless." Another worker said worthless items are frequently turned away, but that valuable donations had only been rejected three or four times in the past three months, for reasons of space and availability of the truck used to pick up donations.

Donations that have exceeded their useful life are often turned away because, as one worker said, "There's [sic] certain items that people are happy to buy if they're good, and there's [sic] certain items that absolutely nobody wants." If a donation is relatively new or valuable, one

worker said, “In 99% of cases I’m going to try to take it... I don’t know where I’m going to put it but I’ll find a place for it because I know this item is going to sell.” All five workers agreed that items are turned away frequently for reasons of being very low in value or, as one respondent put it, “junk.”

When discussing the value of items turned away in the three month period of August through October, two workers estimated that FLR turned away less than \$500 in donations and three could not come up with an estimate. One worker said, “\$500 would be the most, but most of it was crap.” The other worker said, “I don’t think more than \$300.” This finding is consistent with data from the Phone Call Log. Of 163 donation offers received, data about their value was collected for 16. The 16 donation offers were estimated by FLR workers to be worth a total of \$2800. Five of these 16 donations were either rejected or the donor did not follow through on donating the item. Those five items had an estimated worth of \$140, or 5% of the total value of donations offered. While this data is limited, it suggests that valuable donations are usually accepted. This finding also shows that despite space limitations, FLR is probably not losing a substantial amount of revenue from rejecting donations, because most of what is rejected is very low in value.

Finding 3: Respondents identified a number of weaknesses with FLR’s donation management process.

The top three weaknesses of the donation management process mentioned in interviews were: 1) inconsistency in pricing, 2) size and organization of retail space, and 3) time wasted. Other weaknesses mentioned, but not discussed in these findings, are listed in Appendix E.

Inconsistent prices. Inconsistency in the pricing of donations emerged as a repeated theme throughout my analysis of the interview data. Two out of three customers interviewed noted that price is an important factor in choosing to shop at FLR, and one customer noted frustration with the inconsistency of prices. The respondent thought that, “The way things are priced are [sic] based on who is pricing and the mood they are in,” and that “On some things I don’t think the prices are fair. Some things are very cheap, and there are other things that are priced higher than new things in a different store.” Two workers were aware of customer frustration. As one worker explained, “Somebody just showed me...we’ve got a dozen or more brush holders that are identical...the prices range from \$.50 to \$1.00 to \$3.00. And that’s—I mean—there are customers coming up to us with examples like that *every day*.”

In addition to customer concern about pricing inconsistencies, three out of five workers indicated that they were concerned with this issue. As one worker commented, “Our biggest problem right now is inconsistency in pricing.” Three out of five workers mentioned that pricing is not consistent among similar or identical items. For example, one worker said that the same size plate could be priced at either 25 or 50 cents. Two workers recommended the use of a pricing list for common items, to standardize the pricing of incoming donations. One worker felt communication was part of the problem with inconsistency in pricing, stating frustration that “There’s no such thing as an intake meeting.” Further elaborating, the worker said, “There’s virtually *no* communication about intake. Well, it’s all one on one...it’s never in a group and it’s never standardized.”

The electronic point-of-sale (POS) system further compounds the issue of pricing inconsistency as prices cannot easily be changed. Four out of five workers were frustrated with

the POS system. One worker explained, “We can hardly ever go back and reprice the first thing to match the others” and another worker stated that changing a price is “extremely difficult.” The POS system could be symptomatic of a larger problem that may hinder organizational growth, as one person stated, “The POS system is clunky and archaic and is hampering our organization’s growth.”

Size and organization of retail space. Another important donation management concern is the size and organization of FLR’s retail space. According to all five workers interviewed, retail space is a significant consideration when accepting and pricing donations. The interviewees mentioned concerns ranging from the relatively small size of retail space to the efficient use of the space. As one worker said:

It’s not that we’re turning away items. It’s that the items that come in and get priced and go out on the floor are not displayed effectively...they are not even valued effectively sometimes because of the way everything is all mixed up together...we don’t have shelving to display it.

This comment is consistent with Corstjen & Doyle (1981) who explained that limited display space can negatively impact sales. Moreover, two other workers noted that the limited retail space helps determine how items will be priced and displayed. One of these workers said, “I think that the retail space is directly correlated to what we can value our items at.” Because of the limited retail space, the workers’ strategy is to price items low to sell items faster, making room for more donations.

The organization of the retail space is also a concern for two workers. One worker said the ReUse Center has a “schizophrenic personality” and that it needs to be better organized so customers and workers can find things more easily. One of the challenges, as one worker put it, is that “As all retail stores, [the ReUse Center] requires reorganizing and restocking every single

day of operation.” Two workers believed that if the retail area was better organized, sales would be higher.

While four workers reported the problem of space, only one recommended a solution. This solution was to obtain a building materials warehouse, which would separate out building materials from furniture, household goods, and computers and electronics, creating more display space for items that are currently piled on top of each other. This worker said that a larger space would allow for greater customer creativity and thus greater sales.

Time wasted. Time wasted is another theme that emerged in four out of five worker interviews. The causes of wasted time included interruptions, delays in getting directions, problems with the intake forms and problems with pricing donations. This finding is consistent with Chattoe (2000) who stated that donation intake requires time to “sort, repair, clean, test, and otherwise prepare [donations] for sale, price them, [and] put them on display” (p. 157). While workers try to focus on accepting more valuable items, two workers said that low value items are frequently accepted even when they cannot be sold. As mentioned by one worker, “Sometimes we are operating on a loss because we take a big large donation and there’s only 50% of that donation that’s being resold. 50% is just worthless, but we spend 100% of our time and our efforts to process that donation.”

Four workers mentioned that their daily work flows are frequently interrupted, often by other workers. One respondent said that pricing and intake activities are often interrupted by other employees or volunteers looking for a particular item to be priced immediately. Other times, donation processing is interrupted because items are dirty and must be washed or dusted before being put on the retail floor. One worker mentioned, “Sometimes we get things that still

have food on them.” Two workers expressed frustration with the time spent cleaning items. As one worker expressed, “Why should we have to spend more time washing and cleaning crap when it should be clean when it comes in?”

Two workers also mentioned having to wait for direction can delay their work. It may be that compartmentalized duties cause some of these delays, since one worker mentioned, “We have to sit around and wait” for second opinions when pricing certain items. Another worker said, “A lot of times we just sit and wait for [the supervisors] to come back from what they’re doing or you gotta catch ‘em when they’re walking through. It’s just a real time waster.”

In addition, four workers identified problems with intake forms that contribute to wasted time. One worker said, “Sometimes we get a piece of paper that just has the person’s name, no items or anything.” Two workers expressed frustration with the missing information. According to one of these workers, “It’s just so frustrating. I mean when you get a piece of paper without even a name on it, how am I supposed to process this?” Another worker said it is inconvenient when other workers allow donors to fill in the intake forms, because the handwriting can be hard to read and take extra time to decipher. One final problem mentioned by two workers was that intake forms are frequently not kept with their respective donations. As one worker said, “We’re losing items that go with the [form]... [The front register workers are] supposed to put ‘em all in the same area with the paperwork and I have no clue what happens from [the front] to the back.”

A final way time is wasted is on pricing donations. One worker reported this concern, saying, “A lot of time I think time is wasted by looking up stuff... I mean like the simple things like a plate that we usually put 25 cents on or 50 cents, we have to look it up and make sure it’s not worth anything. It’s just a waste of time.” The pricing process involves two steps. First,

workers estimate the worth of the item by researching on websites like Google, Amazon, eBay, and department stores. Then, if there is any doubt on the price, they must get a second opinion or approval from a superior before pricing the item.

Finding 4: FLR workers have differing ideas about how the donation intake process could be improved.

The donation management process is time consuming and complex. As noted by Alexander (2008), Kapp (2012), Joo, Stoeberl, & Kwon (2007), and Tarasuk & Eakin (2005), organizations that distribute or sell donations must manage irregular donations on a daily basis. Staff and volunteers not only handle irregular donations, but they handle donations coming in from multiple locations of the ReUse Center, such as the front and back door, the eCenter, and donations left outside. Workers reported differing ideas about the level and type of staffing needed to manage donations. The solutions proposed were increasing the number of workers, increasing productivity, and creating a donation intake coordinator position.

Increasing the number of workers. Three respondents said that more workers are needed for managing donations. One mentioned needing dedicated staff or volunteers to repair broken items. According to this worker, “If we actually had somebody with the time to just do a little bit more cleaning and minor repairs on some things we could sell more. We could sell stuff that’s getting scrapped.” Another worker said, “We need more than one person at the front desk...one person doing intake, one person helping customers.” As this respondent put it, “Right now we have three people who are processing items and it’s still not enough.” A third worker expressed that staffing levels should be increased and suggested hiring an evening or overnight crew to work on donation processing. On the other hand, one worker felt that adding another

worker to work on pricing would not help, saying, “We already have three people pricing, so [adding more] would make it more difficult” in terms of price consistency.

Increasing productivity. One worker believed that workers need to be better trained on managing donations, and that this would increase productivity. This person said, “The better people are trained, the more experience they have, the more productive they will be.” This worker further elaborated, “You can have 10 people processing items and if they have no idea about pricing...it’s gonna be very slow.” Another aspect of increasing productivity that this same worker mentioned is an understanding of customer needs and customer demand:

In order to build up our revenue, we have to be able to work more productively, which means that we have to be more careful and we have to do a lot of screening in our donations so that we’re not getting something that we can’t sell.

Donation intake coordinator. Finally, three workers mentioned the need for a dedicated intake coordinator. One worker mentioned that front desk cashiers can get overwhelmed both handling customers and donors and said, “I think it would help to have someone specific to take the donations in.” This individual stipulated, “The person that accepts donation needs to have a really good understanding of how we operate.” A second worker mentioned that a dedicated intake coordinator would contribute to increased revenues. A third worker said, “There should be *one* person, who does all of the intake for stuff that’s dropped off” and that “It would be better if there was a single location for where the donor interfaces with us...not part of the sales area.”

Recommendations

Based on the above findings, the following recommendations will assist FLR in improving its donation management process. These recommendations include: 1) modifying the

pricing model, 2) hiring a Material Donations Coordinator who will manage a dedicated Intake Team; and 3) focusing on obtaining a building materials warehouse.

Recommendation 1: Modify the pricing model.

Based on Findings 1 and 3, I recommend that FLR modify its pricing model. As mentioned in Finding 1, each category of material donations has its own supply and demand. FLR should spend some time further analyzing its sales data to discover what items sell faster or slower to improve upon sales. . For example, if certain household goods, like plates, take up valuable shelf space but are only sold once in a while, the organization should work on developing a pricing system that results in faster sales of these items. One way of accomplishing faster sales is through promotions, such as buy-one-get-one free sales on certain items during particular time periods, or by offering other limited time coupons or discounts. Promotional sales would be likely to bring in more traffic and increase overall ReUse Center sales as well.

Another important reason to improve the pricing model is to create pricing consistency. As I mentioned earlier in Finding 3, inconsistency in pricing is one of the biggest problems in the donation management process. Both staff and customers are frustrated with inconsistent prices, and the problem is worsened by difficulty in changing prices once they have been set in the POS system. FLR should focus on improving pricing consistency by addressing the problems with the POS system. Another possible solution to the pricing inconsistencies is to do as two workers suggested and create a standardized pricing list for the most common items sold. Considering one or both of these options would result in a more efficient and consistent pricing system.

Recommendation 2: Hire a Material Donations Coordinator who will manage a dedicated Intake Team of staff and volunteers.

Based on Finding 3, which shows that time is frequently wasted by workers handling donation management, and Finding 4, which indicates three workers recommend hiring a dedicated donation intake coordinator, I recommend that Finger Lakes ReUse hire a dedicated worker to manage incoming material donations and streamline the donation management process. Consistent with research by Alexander (2008) and Tarasuk & Eakin (2005), streamlining logistics can help FLR face the challenge of handling large amounts and varying streams of donations. The Material Donations Coordinator should set up processes that are followed by a dedicated Intake Team, thus reducing the time and cost in sorting and handling donations.

The Intake Team should consist of staff members who currently work on donation management processes, as well as volunteers who will supplement staff duties and provide much additional labor. Consistent with Broadbridge & Parsons (2003), utilizing volunteers is an effective way to keep overhead low, but organizations should be careful to maintain a professional image. FLR's new Material Donations Coordinator will maintain a professional image, and will manage the Intake Team to efficiently handle the daily operations of donation management. As mentioned in Finding 4, workers involved on the Intake Team must have sufficient experience or receive additional training to become qualified to be part of the team.

As part of this new position, the Material Donations Coordinator should be responsible for scheduling regular intake meetings, to discuss best practices for donation management and to formalize protocols and procedures. The coordinator should be able to effectively communicate with all staff and volunteers the duties and expectations of the Intake Team. Hiring a Material

Donation Coordinator is an expense that requires a certain amount of revenue, which may be a concern for the organization. At the very least, creating the Intake Team may be possible, by restructuring current staff responsibilities as well as recruiting additional volunteers while FLR could work on obtaining the resources to create a paid staff position.

Recommendation 3: Focus on obtaining a building materials warehouse.

Finally, based on Findings 1 and 3, I recommend FLR focus on obtaining a building materials warehouse in the near future. As mentioned in Finding 1, building materials account for a majority of items customers purchase and donate. There is high enough supply and demand of building materials to justify the procurement of a separate warehouse or lumber yard. Finding 3 pointed out that limited retail space is a tremendous concern, and one worker suggested that a separate warehouse for building materials would free up room for other items in The ReUse Center. As mentioned by that worker, a building materials warehouse would provide more space for customers to be creative and find alternative uses for items in their homes. Such space would allow FLR to set up room models, sparking curiosity and sales.

Major caveats of this recommendation are the cost of obtaining a new building and questions of timing and financial viability. This is something FLR should weigh along with this recommendation. Also, while this recommendation could significantly reduce the efficiency and retail space problems FLR experiences, it is not a substitute for the other recommendations.

Conclusion

Donation management is a critical aspect of FLR's organizational success. It is therefore imperative that FLR work with its staff and volunteers to address the challenges facing the donation management process. FLR's ability to improve upon its current donation management

system hinge on its motivation in addressing the findings and recommendations in this capstone project.

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Appendices

A—Human Subjects Research Approval

Date: October 16, 2012

To: Shelbi DuBord, CCPA

From: Anne M. Casella, CIP Administrator
Human Subjects Research Review Committee

Subject: Human Subjects Research Approval
Protocol Number: 2067-12
Protocol title: *Finger Lakes ReUse Donation Management*

Your project identified above was reviewed by the HSRRC and has received an Exempt approval pursuant to the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) regulations, 45 CFR 46.110(2) .

An exempt status signifies that you will not be required to submit a Continuing Review application as long as your project involving human subjects remains unchanged. If your project undergoes any changes these changes must be reported to our office prior to implementation. Please complete the modification form found at the following link:http://research.binghamton.edu/Compliance/humansubjects/COEUS_Docs.php

Principal Investigators or any individual involved in the research must report any problems involving the conduct of the study or subject participation. Any problems involving recruitment and consent processes or any deviations from the approved protocol should be reported in writing within five (5) business days as outlined in Binghamton University, Human Subjects Research Review Office, Policy and Procedures IX.F.1 Unanticipated Problems/adverse events/complaints. We require that the Unanticipated Problems/adverse events/complaints form be submitted to our office, found at the following link: http://research.binghamton.edu/Compliance/humansubjects/COEUS_Docs.php

University policy requires you to maintain as a part of your records, any documents pertaining to the use of human subjects in your research. This includes any information or materials conveyed to, and received from, the subjects, as well as any executed consent forms, data and analysis results. These records must be maintained for at least six years after project completion or termination. If this is a funded project, you should be aware that these records are subject to inspection and review by authorized representative of the University, State and Federal governments.

Please notify this office when your project is complete by completing and forwarding to our office the Protocol closure form found at the following link:http://research.binghamton.edu/Compliance/humansubjects/COEUS_Docs.php Upon

notification we will close the above referenced file. Any reactivation of the project will require a new application.

This documentation is being provided to you via email. A hard copy will not be mailed unless you request us to do so.

Thank you for your cooperation, I wish you success in your research, and please do not hesitate to contact our office if you have any questions or require further assistance.

cc: file
Kristina Lambright

Diane Bulizak, Secretary
Human Subjects Research Review Office
Biotechnology Building, Room 2205
85 Murray Hill Rd.
Vestal, NY 13850
dbulizak@binghamton.edu
Telephone: (607) 777-3818
Fax: (607) 777-5025



B—Oral Consent for Telephone Interviews

Hello. My name is Shelbi DuBord, and I am a researcher at Binghamton University, working on a research project on behalf of Finger Lakes ReUse to improve their donation management process.

You are being contacted because you were identified as someone who has donated to Finger Lakes ReUse in the past. Your decision whether or not to participate will not prejudice your future relations with the Finger Lakes ReUse. If you decide to participate, you are not obligated to answer all questions, and may stop at any time.

If you agree, I would like to ask you some questions about your perspective on the donation process. The interview should take about 30 minutes. Your responses are confidential and will be grouped with other people who were interviewed.

If you have any additional questions later, I will be happy to answer them. If at any time you have questions concerning your rights as a research subject you may call Binghamton University's Human Subject's Research Review Committee at (607) 777-3818.

Do you have any questions about the research project? (If no) May I proceed with the first question?

C—Informed Consent for Worker Interviews

INFORMED CONSENT

Project Director of Principal Investigator: Shelbi DuBord

Title of Project: Finger Lakes ReUse Donation Management

You are invited to participate in a research study of Finger Lakes ReUse donation management. I hope to learn your perception of its strengths and weaknesses. You were selected as a participant in this study because you are an FLR staff member/volunteer.

If you decide to participate, I will arrange a time and place to meet together for an interview. In the interview, I will ask about your experiences with Finger Lakes ReUse. The meeting will last between 30-60 minutes. In addition to taking handwritten notes, with your permission, I will use an audio tape recorder for transcription and validation purposes. You do not need to answer any question that you do not wish to answer during the interview. I cannot and do not guarantee or promise that you will receive any benefits from this study.

The data collected will be used for analysis by the researcher. Data will be stored in a locked file cabinet and linked with a code to subjects' identity, and will be destroyed upon completion of the study procedures. This research will remain confidential unless I am required by New York State Law to report harm to yourself or your children.

Your decision whether or not to participate will not prejudice your future relations with Finger Lakes ReUse or Binghamton University. Your participation is voluntary and you are free to withdraw your consent and to discontinue participation at any time without prejudice.

Before you sign the form, please ask questions on any aspect of the study that is at all unclear to you. If you have any additional questions, concerns, or complaints later or wish to report a research related problem, Shelbi DuBord, shale1@binghamton.edu will be happy to answer them. If at any time you have questions concerning your rights as a research subject or you have questions, concerns, or complaints about the research you may call Binghamton University's Human Subject's Research Review Committee at (607) 777-3818. You will be given a copy of this form to keep.

YOU ARE MAKING A DECISION WHETHER OR NOT TO PARTICIPATE. YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE DECIDED TO PARTICIPATE HAVING READ THE INFORMATION PROVIDED ABOVE.

Date _____

Time _____ AM/PM

Signature _____

Signature of Investigator _____

D—Interview Questions

Workers

- How did you start working here?
- Please describe a typical day in your work life.
- Can you describe the current donation intake process?
- How has this evolved over time?
- What are its strengths?
- What are its weaknesses?
- What do you do when you have to refuse a donation?
- How do customers react when something is refused?
- What would you estimate is the value of all donations turned away since using the Phone Call Log? (Aug 2-Oct 30)
- What do you think could be improved about the donation process?
- Is there anything else that is important for me to know that we haven't had a chance to talk about?

Donors

- Why have you chosen to donate to FLR?
- How often do you donate to FLR?
- Have you ever had donations refused?
- What items were refused and why?
- What did you end up doing with the item refused?
- What do you think could be improved about the donation process?
- What items do you generally donate?
- How often do you donate those items?
- Where do you donate the most frequently and why?
- Is there anything else that is important for me to know that we haven't had a chance to talk about?

Customers

- Why have you chosen to shop at the ReUse Center?
- How often do you shop at the RC?
- What items do you buy and why?
- Where else do you shop for these items?
- How often do you shop for these things?
- What factors affect your decisions to shop here?
- Which factor is most important to you?
- Is there anything else that is important for me to know that we haven't had a chance to talk about?

E—Codes Used in Worker Interviews

Code Number	Problem or Concept	Worker A	Worker B	Worker C	Worker D	Worker E	<i>Total Number of Mentions</i>
1	Frustration with pricing protocol	5			2	4	11
2	Frustration with space limitations	3	2	4	1		10
3	Time wasted	1	3		1	4	9
4	Inadequate levels of staff	1	2	2	3	1	9
5	Intake forms missing information	1	2		1	4	8
6	Worthlessness of donations	1	3	3		1	8
7	Difficulty with POS system	1	3	1	2		7
8	Items need to be cleaned or repaired before sale	1	3		1	1	6
9	Lots of donations to handle	1	1	1	1	1	5
10	Items are rarely turned away due to space	1	1	1	1	1	5
11	Frequent interruptions	1	1		1	1	4
12	Pricing strategies	1		3			4
13	Organization of retail space	1			3		4
14	Mission conflict			2	2		4
15	Need specific intake person	1			1	1	3
16	Need greater productivity			1		1	2
17	Specialized duties cause problems	1					1
18	Communication issues	1					1

F—Phone Call Log Frequency Tables

Frequency of Phone Call Reasons, Aug. 2 to Oct. 30, 2012

REASON FOR CALL	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Looking for	231	33%
Donation inquiry	190	27%
eCenter	105	15%
Message	54	8%
Other	32	5%
Hours	31	4%
Decon Request	18	3%
Directions	16	2%
Delivery Request	16	2%
Complaint	7	1%
Sales	6	1%
TOTAL	706	100%

Frequency of Calls **Looking For Items**, by Category

CATEGORY	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Building Materials	111	49.6%
Computers & Peripherals	42	18.8%
Furniture	38	17.0%
Household Goods	18	8.0%
Home Electronics	15	6.7%
TOTAL	224	100.00%

Frequency of **Donation Offers Received by Phone**, by Category

CATEGORY	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Building Materials	54	29.2%
Furniture	48	25.9%
Household Goods	29	15.7%
Computers & Peripherals	27	14.6%
Home Electronics	27	14.6%
TOTAL	185	100.0%

Frequency of Calls **Looking for** Items Within Building Materials Category,
by Subcategory

BUILDING MATERIALS SUBCATEGORIES	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Appliances & Parts	26	23%
Lumber & Wood Trim	15	14%
Heating, Radiators, Furnace	13	12%
Cabinetry, Kitchen & Bath	12	11%
Windows & Doors	8	7%
Plumbing	6	5%
Flooring, Wood, Tile	5	5%
Fencing	5	5%
Building Materials	4	4%
Hardware	4	4%
Siding & Shutters, Interior & Exterior	4	4%
Roof & Gutter	3	3%
Architectural Items	2	2%
Lighting & Ceiling Fans	2	2%
Masonry, Brick, Stone, Block	1	1%
Staircase, Rails, Spindles	1	1%
Paint	0	0%
Electrical - Parts & Access.	0	0%
TOTAL	111	100%

Frequency of Calls to **Donate Items** Within Building Materials Category, by Subcategory

SUBCATEGORY	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Doors	20	32%
Appliances & Parts	9	14%
Plumbing	9	14%
Building Materials	6	10%
Cabinetry, Kitchen & Bath	6	10%
Lighting & Ceiling Fans	4	6%
Lumber & Wood Trim	3	5%
Flooring, Wood, Tile	3	5%
Heating, Radiators, Furnace	2	3%
Shutters, Interior & Exterior	1	2%
Architectural Items	0	0%
Hardware	0	0%
Masonry, Brick, Stone, Block	0	0%
Paint	0	0%
Fencing	0	0%
Roof & Gutter	0	0%
Electrical - Parts & Acces.	0	0%
Staircase, Rails, Spindles	0	0%
TOTAL	63	100%