

Veterinarians to Veterans United, Inc.: A Marketing Case

OUTSTANDING PAPER – Marketing Education/Experiential Learning

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Abstract

This case study highlights an innovative nonprofit organization (Veterinarians to Veterans United, Inc.) whose mission is to provide service, therapeutic, and emotional support animals, and discounted veterinary care to US veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress and related conditions. Through the work of the organization a reduction in the number of animals euthanized at animal shelters is also expected to occur. Veterinarians to Veterans United, Inc. faces marketing challenges. US veterans are the primary focus of the organization; a population whose needs at times are overlooked and one that is often viewed as a homogeneous group. The case requires students to reflect on the unique needs of the US veteran population and highlights the diverse segments that exist among the veteran population. Additionally, the challenges and complexities organizations face when in order to be successful, multiple target audiences must be considered are illuminated. In this case study, the target audiences include veterinarians, veterans, and related organizations that serve veterans. Lastly and importantly, this case study allows students the opportunity to expand their view of marketing and its application.

Introduction

The challenges associated with post-traumatic stress syndrome (PTSD), a mental condition that many US veterans have faced following their tours of duty, have been found to adversely impact a veteran's daily life. Veterinarians to Veterans United, Inc. (Vets to Vets), an organization tasked with training and pairing service dogs with veterans that suffer from PTSD, was founded in 2012 by Dr. Terry Morris. The organization is based in North Carolina. Through the work of the organization, she has raised the level of awareness of veterans living with PTSD and positively impacted the lives of both veterans and dogs. The participating dogs were acquired from the local animal shelter and otherwise may have risked the possibility of being euthanized. Dr. Morris wondered whether or not Vets to Vets, which was established as a non-profit organization, could benefit from a marketing campaign. Could marketing help her increase her fundraising and allow her to expand and sustain this critical program?

Dr. Morris has decided that her organization should consider developing a marketing plan that clearly defines the marketing and fundraising objectives and the resources required to achieve

those objectives. During a conversation with a marketing faculty member at one of the local universities, she became aware of the role marketing can play in helping her organization. Specifically, the conversation confirmed for her that marketing was an important opportunity for a nonprofit organization, just as it was for any other organization.

The marketing concept is as important for nonprofit organizations as it is for business firms. In fact, marketing applies to all sorts of public and private nonprofit organizations ranging from government agencies, health care organizations, educational institutions, and religious groups to charities, political parties and fine arts organizations (Perreault, Cannon and McCarthy, 2013, p. 22).

Additionally, she learned that social marketing represented an area of marketing that was relevant for her organization.

Social marketing principles and techniques are most often used to improve public health, prevent injuries, protect the environment, increase involvement in the community, and enhance financial well-being. Those engaged in social marketing activities include professionals in public sector agencies, nonprofit organizations, corporate marketing departments and advertising public relations, and market research firms (Lee and Kotler, 2016, p.33).

Dr. Morris wondered if Vets to Vets would benefit from a marketing plan that clearly communicated its value proposition and that identified sustainable funding sources. She wondered if marketing could help her expand the number of service teams participating in the Vets to Vets program (and the number of service teams graduating from the program), thereby expanding the community impact of Vets to Vets and “improving lives, saving lives, one veteran and one dog at a time”.

The following sections will provide pertinent information regarding the US veteran population, PTSD, Dr. Morris and the Vets to Vets organization.

US Veteran Population

According to a US News article, the total population of veterans is expected to decrease from approximately 20.4 million in 2016 to approximately 12 million in 2045, as veterans of previous wars (such as Vietnam) pass away. Over time, the veteran population was expected to become more diverse as women and minorities comprise a greater percentage of this population (Hanson, 2017). Exhibit 1 summarized the expected shift in the number and percentage of US veterans by gender.

Exhibit 1: Projected Number of Veterans (Men and Women) (000s)

	Total	Men	Women
2016	20,400	18,500	1,900
2045	12,000	10,000	2,200

Adapted from: “Veteran population to shift in next 30 years” by C. Hanson, US News and World Report, November 14, 2017. Retrieved on December 18, 2017 from <https://www.usnews.com/news/national-news/articles/2017-11-14/demographics-of-veteran-population-to-shift-in-next-30-years>.

That same news source reported that the racial and ethnic demographics of the veteran population was expected to shift and reflect the increased diversity occurring in the overall US population. Specifically, the proportion of Hispanic veterans was forecasted to nearly double in the next three decades, and the percentage of black or African-American veterans was expected to increase about 4 percent. Additionally, a Pew Research Center publication, noted that African Americans were disproportionately represented in the US military. In 2015, African Americans comprised 17% of the active-duty military and comprised 13% of the US population (ages 18 – 44) (Parker, Cilluffo, and Stepler, 2017). Exhibit 2 provided information regarding the number of living veterans by race for both the US, as well as the state of North Carolina (the state in which Vets to Vets was established).

Exhibit 2: 2016 Living Veteran Population: US and the state of North Carolina

	Total US	North Carolina
All Veterans	20,392,92	731,378
White, alone	16,712,215	542,737
Black or African American, alone	2,477,690	159,781
American Indian and Alaska Native, alone	145,764	6,549
Asian, alone	320,985	4,410
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander, alone	39,709	532

Some other race, alone	285,395	6,677
Two or more races	410,434	10,691

Note: Hispanic or Latino population (of any race) was reported to be 1,474,558 for the US and 26,598 for the state of North Carolina.

Adapted from US Department of Veterans Affairs, National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics. Retrieved on December 18, 2017 from https://www.va.gov/vetdata/veteran_population.asp.

Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, “PTSD is a disorder that develops in some people who have experienced a shocking, scary, or dangerous event.” While an array of reactions may have been experienced by an individual following a trauma, most people recover naturally from initial symptoms. “Those who continue to experience problems may be diagnosed with PTSD. People who have PTSD may feel stressed or frightened even when they are not in danger.” (<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/post-traumatic-stress-disorder-ptsd/index.shtml>).

For the overall US population, the US Department of Veteran Affairs (2017) estimated that 7 – 8% of the population would experience PTSD during their lifetime. The incidence was reported to be higher for women (approximately 10%) compared to approximately 4% for men. Statistics gathered regarding the incidence of PTSD among US veterans of particular service eras was summarized in Exhibit 3 (<https://www.ptsd.va.gov/public/ptsd-overview/basics/how-common-is-ptsd.asp>).

Exhibit 3: Percent of Veterans Suffering from PTSD (per year)

Service Era	Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom	Gulf War (Desert Storm)	Vietnam War
Percent	11 – 20%	12%	15%*

*Note: Research also revealed that overall estimates for Vietnam veterans was that 30% of them had experienced PTSD at some time in their life. Adapted from US Department of Veterans Affairs, PTSD: National Center for PTSD, How common is PTSD? Retrieved on December 18, 2017 from <https://www.ptsd.va.gov/public/ptsd-overview/basics/how-common-is-ptsd.asp>.

Numerous combat related factors were found to contribute to PTSD. According to the Veterans Administration, PTSD: National Center for PTSD, “these factors include what you do in the war,

the politics around the war, where the war is fought, and the type of enemy you face”. (<https://www.ptsd.va.gov/public/ptsd-overview/basics/how-common-is-ptsd.asp>.) Although the cause was unclear, the National Institute of Health reported that African American veterans have experienced higher prevalence rates of PTSD than whites. According to the Veterans’ Administration in a study conducted in 1990, the rate of PTSD among Vietnam era veterans was higher in both African Americans and Hispanic males than among white males. The reported rates were 28%, 21% and 14% respectively (Loo, 2017).

PTSD has been noted as a serious condition that can impact an individual’s daily life. The risk of suicide was higher among veterans suffering from PTSD. The US Department of Veteran Affairs estimated that each day 20 veterans committed suicide (<https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/docs/2016suicidedatareport.pdf>). Treatment for PTSD has included multiple drugs to address the multiple symptoms associated with the condition. The drugs have been known to produce side effects that can adversely impact the veteran’s quality of life (Morris, 2016).

Dr. Terry Morris – The Executive Director

Dr. Terry Morris, an African American woman with a passion for helping animals and assisting veterans, is the founder of Vets to Vets. Through the establishment of Vets to Vets, Dr. Morris successfully married her two passions. In addition to being a doctor of veterinary medicine, Dr. Morris earned a Master of Science degree in biology and a Ph.D. in molecular microbiology and immunology. Prior to starting Vets to Vets, she was employed as a research associate in molecular biology at one of the local universities. Dr. Morris has dedicated Vets to Vets to her father and her sister. Dr. Morris’ father was a Tuskegee Airman who lost his life during his tour of duty as a Captain in the US Air Force. Her sister, who also served as a Captain in the Air Force, was the first female to graduate from the Air Force’s ROTC pilot training program at Tuskegee University. Dr. Morris has tremendous respect and admiration for veterans and is sensitive to the challenges they face upon their return from service.

When veterans return from war, many of them face emotional and physical health challenges while transitioning back into civilian life. Stress, anger, aggression, depression, physiological limitations, and disabilities can lead to serious disruptions in quality of life for them, their family members and the community as a whole. Many veterans discover that the support of a service dog can positively transform their lives by allowing them to live independently. In many cases, service dogs can be lifesaving. (Morris 2016, p. 64)

Since starting Vets to Vets, Dr. Morris has had the opportunity to present her organization to various audiences. In each presentation she has communicated that PTSD is a psychiatric condition that can manifest after experiencing or witnessing any number of a life-threatening events (such as military combat, natural disasters, terrorist incidents, serious accidents, or physical or sexual assault). She has further emphasized that for an individual suffering from PTSD, stress reactions to such events do not go away on their own. She outlined cases in which

the stress reactions worsened as time passes with individuals living their trauma through nightmares and flashbacks.

Vets to Vets – The Organization

The following information regarding purpose and mission appeared on the Vets to Vets website (www.vetstovetsunited.org).

Vets To Vets United, Inc., a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, consists of local veterinarians and volunteers working together to provide service, therapeutic, and emotional support animals, and discounted veterinary care to our U.S. Military Veterans suffering from loneliness, depression, post-traumatic stress, traumatic brain injury, and physical disabilities. This service will also significantly reduce the number of animals euthanized at the local animal shelters.

The Vets To Vets United, Inc. mission is to:

- Provide as many veterans as possible in need of companionship, service and love with service, therapeutic or companion animals.
- Reduce the high numbers of animals unnecessarily euthanized in the local shelters, which are also in desperate need of love and companionship.
- Provide services and training at no cost to the veteran.
- Motivate our veterans by providing fun/educational activities and community service.

Thirteen service teams (comprised of a veteran and their dog) have completed their training with Vets to Vets. On average, the training program for the service teams took about two years. “The bond is developed and strengthened during those two years,” according to Dr. Morris. Any veteran that has experienced depression, PTSD, traumatic brain injury or has a physical disability is eligible for participation in the Vets to Vets program. Some of the benefits associated with a veteran’s use of a service dog included:

- Decreased emotional numbness
- Enhanced communication ability (due to teaching dog commands)
- Decreased hypervigilance
- Decreased paranoia
- Improved sleep (Morris, 2016).

Vets to Vets has conducted its own research with its service teams that has also shown positive outcomes for veterans that have participated in its program. Additionally, Dr. Morris states “there are no side effects from having a service dog to help ease symptoms of PTSD, unlike many medications, and the loving bond created between a veteran and a dog will last forever.” (Morris, 2016, p.65).

All veterans that have enrolled in the Vets to Vets program have completed a screening questionnaire to determine their needs and selected their dog from the local animal shelter. The selection of a dog from the animal shelter was critical, as it supported an important philosophical view embraced by the Vets to Vets organization - “Improving lives, saving lives, one veteran and one dog at a time.”

According to the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, 3.7 million animals were euthanized in shelters across the country in 2008 (<https://www.americanhumane.org/fact-sheet/animal-shelter-euthanasia-2/>). Dr. Morris’ research showed that North Carolina was the number one euthanasia state in the US for dogs. Additionally, based on 2016 data from the North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Service, it was calculated that a total of 108,185 dogs were taken into animal shelters and approximately 24% or 26,096 of them were euthanized (<http://ncagr.gov/vet/aws/Fix/documents/2016AnimalShelterReportPDF3-9-17.pdf>).

Vets to Vets offered participating veterans the opportunity to receive a well-trained service dog at no cost to the veteran. Dogs in training with Vets to Vets were also used to visit schools, nursing homes and VA hospitals monthly. Local veterinarians provided free or discounted care for Vets to Vets dogs. Training was provided at no charge. Dr. Morris estimated that on average the costs incurred by Vets to Vets for a trained service dog was \$12,000. Additionally, she estimated that similar programs incurred costs of approximately \$40,000 for a trained service dog, and that veterans incurred fees.

Fundraising has consistently challenged Vets to Vets since its inception. Consequently, the organization has relied heavily on volunteers to execute its promotional activities (which have been focused on community events ranging from music festivals to health fairs for veterans to events with local pet stores). These events have primarily focused on building awareness of Vets to Vets and obtaining individual donations. Some of the other fundraising efforts have included a Go Fund Me campaign and several small grants. The organization has also benefited from in-kind donations and local sponsorships from companies.

The Future

Dr. Morris’ research revealed 75,000 veterans in her immediate service area, many of whom could benefit from a service dog. Since its inception, Vets to Vets has established 28 service teams. Unfortunately, one of the participating veterans committed suicide due to PTSD after several months in the program. On the positive side, as of December 2017, thirteen service

teams have graduated from the program. The remaining service teams have continued their training and progressed toward program completion.

For additional information regarding the implementation of this case in a marketing course, please contact the authors: Dr. Yvette Lynne Bonaparte (Bonapartephd@gmail.com) or Dr. Sharon D. White (Sharon.white@nccu.edu).

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Keywords: marketing, social marketing, nonprofit, veterans, veterinarians, target audience

Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers, and Practitioners

This case study can be used to facilitate a provocative discussion among marketing educators, researchers and practitioners, regarding an important segment of society, US veterans. The Veterinarians to Veterans, United, Inc. case study highlights an innovative nonprofit organization that faces marketing challenges. The organization focuses on veterans, a population whose needs at times are overlooked and a population that is often viewed as a homogeneous group. In fact, the US veteran population is very diverse, and its diversity is forecasted to continue.

Track: Education/Experiential Learning

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