Nutrition and Aging
Resource Center

Business 101: Tips to Ensure Your Program Runs Smoothly and Efficiently
FOR SENIOR NUTRITION PROGRAMS

People who work for community-based organizations may not think of themselves as having strong business skills, or even consider the important role that good business practices play in delivering successful programs and services. After all, when you work for a cause, your focus isn't on profits.

But that doesn't mean the basics of running a business don't also apply to you. Here are some tips to help ensure your program runs smoothly and efficiently, so you can focus on what matters most: helping others.

PLANNING

Have a strategic plan. What is a strategic plan and why do you need one? Simply put, a strategic plan is an overall guiding document for an organization. Every organization — whether it is in the business of making a profit or not — should have a strategic plan. It spells out your goals and objectives, target populations, and strategies and tactics for reaching those populations. A plan also helps to keep staff focused on the most important priorities. To not have a strategic plan is like a plane flying without any navigation to guide the pilot. You need to know where you are going and why. For assistance, consider tapping into SCORE, the nation's largest network of volunteer, expert business mentors. The nonprofit organization offers a number of free resources, including resources on strategic planning.

Develop a crisis plan. If we learned something from COVID-19, it is that a crisis can happen at any time. And, no one is immune from the unexpected. It's not a matter of if, but when, a crisis will hit. Rather than hoping it won't happen, it's best to prepare in advance for the types of events that are most likely to occur and to develop a plan of action before they do. A few scenarios to consider are public health emergencies (such as a pandemic), natural disasters (such as tornadoes, floods, or other severe weather events), staffing issues, legal problems, financial challenges, or operational disruptions that prevent you from delivering your services. You need to think about each scenario how it would affect your program, then develop actions and steps you would take during this crisis. The plan should include a primary point of contact for your organization, a phone tree, and how you will carry about the core of your mission. Review the plan each year to make updates and refresh staff and volunteers on what to do in case of an emergency.

COMMUNICATIONS

Develop a marketing and communications plan. It's important for your community to know who you are and what you do — but they won't unless you tell them! That's why you'll need to create a marketing and communications plan outlining how you will promote your program to the public. Much like your strategic plan, a marketing and communications plan supports your program's overall goals. For example, if your program goal is to serve more older adults in your community, your marketing and communications goal could be to raise your program's visibility by writing an article for your local newspaper about how your program helps older adults in your community. Build ongoing promotion

into your plan that creates positive public awareness. For some examples of how you can build greater public awareness, check out these resources from SCORE.

Use word of mouth. Promotion also includes informal communication and conversations with family, friends, neighbors, and community leaders. Don't be shy. Take advantage of opportunities to talk to people about the valuable and important work your program does and encourage them to tell others or to get involved.

ADMINISTRATION

Stay on top of your finances. People who are mission focused often don't enjoy managing finances. They would much rather focus on what drew them to the work in the first place: program delivery. Yet it's important to understand and stay on top of your budget. Having a good handle on your expenses not only will give you peace of mind, but also will be invaluable when it comes time to report out on them.

Keep detailed records. Staying on top of the details surrounding your programs and services is essential. Detailed record-keeping helps when you need to onboard new staff or volunteers. It's also important for demonstrating value and results to stakeholders in your community and beyond.

BUILDING CONNECTIONS

Know your customers. We've all heard about the importance of knowing your customers. When it comes to delivering your program, it's crucial to understand the people you serve, what they want, and what is important to them. All of these elements may change over time, but by focusing on your clients, you will be able to meet — and even exceed — their needs and expectations.

Build partnerships. Partnering with other organizations and programs can expand your reach within your community. Seek out those with strong connections to your target population or similar strategic goals and find ways to work together, share resources, and enhance your program's impact.

EVALUATION

Solicit feedback. Check in periodically with your clients. Ask them how you're doing and how you can improve. Everyone likes to be asked for feedback because it shows you care. Your clients often will have excellent suggestions for ways to improve or ideas you haven't even considered. They can also be your best advocates, helping to spread the word about the many benefits you bring to the community. For guidance, this blog on SCORE's website provides a step-by-step plan on how to create an effective customer survey.

Measure what matters. When you measure what you do, it helps show your progress toward achieving your goals. Start by tracking key metrics, such as number of clients served. Then consider what else you could be measuring to help you to better deliver your program. You may be surprised by all the useful information you have right in front of you. Once you've collected what you need, the next step is to take the time to evaluate it — what does it mean? This will give you valuable insight on where you are succeeding and where you need to improve.

Developing your business skills is essential to running a successful program and delivering quality services to your community. For more information on how to build your business skills, visit SCORE and USAing's Aging and Disability Business Institute.