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Initial Objective

When I first came to Abriendo Mentes, they hired me almost as a consultant for their women's group, Mujeres Activas de Potrero (MAP), and associated social enterprise The SHOP. Attendance numbers were dwindling and the enterprise had not broken even seven months of the last year. They presented me with the task of assessing both the women's group and the enterprise to determine if they could be revamped to thrive, and if so, how?

Process & Changes Made

The SHOP:

Initial assessments-

I analyzed the data that we had available on past sales, other forms of revenue, expenses, etc along with product mix, pricing, placement, etc. So-called "data" was comprised of hard numbers that we had on the books, as well as softer information like anecdotes and remembrances of coworkers and community members. My largest obstacle in this process was the lack of information in recorded numbers, and inconsistencies in conversations from one person to another. Nonetheless, I assessed the situation to the best of my ability and moved forward with these objectives:

1. *Re-structure payment methods both to vendors and the MAP seamstresses.* The new model guaranteed pay to the seamstresses for their work, which was made possible by increasing the percentage of vendor product sales kept by The SHOP -from 10% to 30%. At the same time, I encouraged vendors to increase quality and prices so that each product sold generated the same amount of income as before.
2. *Establish a standard product mix (SPM) and pricing strategy for the MAP products.* The idea was to develop a mix that allowed for seamstress creativity, yet appealed to the target market. With this new mix of more desirable products, we could sell at a bit of a higher price point. Before, many products were not appealing to the tourist masses, and therefore would not

sell until they were priced so low that it cost just over the fabric used to make them. (This cannot be said for all products, but probably applies to more than 50%)

3. *Work with vendors to create better products and a pricing strategy.* Vendors also had the problem of making less desirable products. After gaining their trust, I worked with individuals to point out the things that were really beautiful and encourage them to make more of that product. Soon, they saw that these were not only selling more quickly, but also at a higher price. These higher prices compensated for the extra 20% we were keeping to cover overhead, so it was as if they maintained the same income per product. While we were more able to cover overhead and break-even.

Secondary approaches-

While I was able to maintain a break-even for The SHOP, there was certainly more to be done to make it a truly thriving business.

1. *Dissolve the MAP sewing group.* Unfortunately, there was not enough interest and attendance to justify the continuation of our sewing program. We sold the extra fabrics and sewing machines for seed money in future programming, and turned the upstairs space into an office (which was much needed for Abriendo Mentes staff). Nonetheless, seamstresses were encouraged to continue making the products that we had developed in our SPM, as well as their own creations. From here on out, we will continue to sell sewn products in the same manner that we do other vendors. We also continue to refer locals to former MAP members for alterations, repairs, custom made products, etc.
2. *Recruit more vendors to increasing product variety while extend economic opportunity to a larger population.* I was able to develop relationships with five new vendors, two of which are from our partner community down the road, Brasilito.

Tertiary approach-

1. *Add a thrift shop to The SHOP.* Just at the end of my time in Costa Rica, I worked with my boss, Lindsay, to turn our donation stockpile into a thrift shop behind our artisanal goods. Previously, these donations were sold in "garage sales" which took place every few months, and were very well attended by local community members. Although they were successful in fundraising, everything was done in such haste that clothes were underpriced, items were occasionally stolen, and its infrequency prevented many from the opportunity to attend. With this in mind, we decided to dedicate space in The SHOP to make the thrift items more accessible, fairly, and properly priced. Our grand opening was wildly successful and I expect this success continues to support The SHOP and its financial activity as well.

MAP:

My other task was to try to re-establish our non-business portion of our women's programming.

1. *Immerse myself, develop relationships with the women in the community and see what they truly want from our programs.*
2. *Hold a community-wide meeting for women in Potrero, and go over what we are hoping to provide with the new programming.* We ended up having great attendance, with women ranging from their late teens well into their seventies. There was a brainstorming session and finally a vote to gauge how widespread the interest was in each potential program.
3. Pilot programs. The following programs emerged as the most popular.
 - a. Repostería (Baking) → This program started off strong, with attendance of our first two classes at 7-8 women. We made sure that the times and frequencies were consistent with what was expressed in the meeting, but that initial excitement dwindled. After the first few classes we saw less and less attendance until we removed it altogether.
 - b. Manualidades (crafts and DIY projects) → Although interest was high, attendance was very low, and after three attempted classes we removed the program for lack of interest.
 - c. Club de Salud (Health Club) → In the meeting, by far, the greatest interest was in community Zumba classes. This was something that was already offered by a local teacher, but it was not quite affordable enough for everyone to participate regularly (about \$5 equivalent per class). Initially, our plan was to not spend much on programming, but the potential for this program was too great to overlook.

Since then, we have created a contract with the local teacher, Ruth, in which we pay for her transportation to and from class, twice per week, and she offers classes at only a \$2 equivalent. This group has been widely successful! Every class has around thirty women, ranging from their teens to late sixties. Just recently, we began a portion of the group where they can participate in tracking their weight, and our first charla (health talk/lecture) will take place on Friday, May 13th!! I am elated at the success of this program, and excited to see where it takes the women's health of the community for years to come.

- d. There was also a request for sewing classes for beginners, but we do not have the budget to hire someone. Nonetheless, there is a course

offered through a government program, which I applied for. We are currently waiting for availability with this program to come to Potrero.

Where We Are Now

- Vendors- When I first arrived, here we had two strong vendors with three rather inactive ones. Since then I have developed relationships with four more and helped to renew interest in two of the three previously inactive artisans.
- Financials- With business restricting, creativity, and determination, we have continued to break even since my arrival in June of 2015. I also developed a new QuickBooks file that establishes a system for tracking inventory, expenses, and other more detailed data points on top of sales.
- Signature fundraiser- Along with a local expat, I developed a “discount card,” which is similar to the concept of coupon booklets for local restaurants and businesses. This card has unlimited uses for each discount, but expires at the end of the year. Thus, this will become a signature annual fundraiser for The SHOP.
- The thrift shop portion of The SHOP was established with a grand opening on April 1st. Thus far it has proven to be very successful.
- The SHOP was re-designed to create space for the second hand items, and to better display the artisan goods.

Highlights

- Some of my best moments from Costa Rica were with community members, working together for the better of the community. I also really cherished the Zumba classes in which I participated with the women’s group. The atmosphere and female camaraderie was such an amazing energy, and I will truly miss those nights together.
- Another highlight of mine was the development of my relationship with Gladys, the one seamstress who was working consistently till the end.
- It was very satisfying to see my efforts come together in the end with added vendors, product success, remodeling, and the addition of the thrift shop!

Lessons Learned

The biggest lesson that I learned was one that I was already partially aware of, but really experienced first hand during my time in Costa Rica. No matter how much you want to help people by providing something, you can't force them to want what you hope to provide. We tend to get these grand ideas in our heads of what would be great for a community or group of people, but what we imagine isn't always what they want or need for themselves. It is very important to listen to the people who you are trying to serve.

Beyond that, you must be ready to fail, and sometimes frequently. The non-profit world is a series of trials and errors, and is constantly changing. I have learned to see every "failure" not as something negative, but as one step closer to success.

Overall, I learned a great deal in Costa Rica, not only in my work, but also in myself. I believe that this experience will stick with me and guide me through my next step in life as I work in the corporate world of consulting. My hope is that I can take what I discovered in Costa Rica, and build upon it with more structured concepts of problem solving, to then launch my life in the world of non-profit consulting.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to have this experience of a lifetime!