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Honors Thesis Review: *A Study of the Big Dish*

For my Honors Thesis Review, I decided to evaluate *A Study of the Big Dish: Planning & Executing a Successful Fundraising Event*, which was conducted by OSU student Kelsey Ring along with other students and faculty in the Hospitality Management program. Based on research conducted in 2012, the thesis discusses the then-new Big Dish fundraising dinner, and the successes and challenges of putting it together.

Ring and her fellow researchers aimed to discover what was needed to not only put on an annual fundraising event, but also to keep it successful and have satisfied guests year after year. When creating the Big Dish event, which replaced the Rising Stars event, the Hospitality Management program aimed to further incorporate students in the Hospitality Management program, especially students enrolled in the Special Events Management course. Those students were to do much of the planning for the event from start to finish, as well as help to run aspects of it. A group of these students formed the Big Dish Committee to help accomplish these tasks. The committee came up with several short- and long-term goals, including creating an awareness of the event and Hospitality program, and transitioning the event to be one-hundred percent student-run. The most significant of their long-term goals was to establish a group of donors to assist with funding the Hospitality Management program. At that time, the program didn’t have enough funds to support desired initiatives including new classrooms and scholarships. Thus, a new pool of donors was desired, so the program could reach new heights. In order to gain continuing fundraising, Ring felt that the Big Dish event had to provide utmost donor and guest satisfaction, which is what her research aimed to measure.

To answer her research question, “What will it take to make a fundraising event like The Big Dish successful?”, Ring hypothesized that success could be measured both by numerical values (including the number of tickets sold and monetary amount of donations) as well as through guest satisfaction feedback, and other observations. Her independent variable was the monetary amount of donations and other support that came from those in the Hospitality industry. The dependent variable, per Ring, was the “success” of the Big Dish event, which was measured both in terms of numerical values and guest satisfaction. The research conducted focused solely on the inaugural Big Dish event, however the thesis discussed the possibility of a longitudinal study by researching the success of future events

For the study’s numerical measures, the event’s attendees were separated into three groups based on ticket information-industry professionals, OSU faculty and staff, and students-in order to most accurately depict the outcome of the event. Attendees were also specified as paying and non-paying to further help with accuracy. Through this information, the researchers were able to determine how much revenue was made in ticket sales, as well as for other sponsorships and raffle items being sold (Ring).

To measure guest satisfaction and to make organizing future events as seamless as possible, the Big Dish Committee took notes at every step of the planning process. The committee also conducted two different surveys to gauge guest satisfaction and feedback; the first survey was conducted at the event itself. Guests were encouraged to complete the paper survey via an in-kind donation of a hotel stay and restaurant meal, among other prizes. Additionally, an online survey was sent out approximately a week after the conclusion of the event. While researchers anticipated a lower response rate with the second survey, they felt that any possible responses were useful as it asked more broad questions about the event itself. Separate versions were sent to industry professionals and students to gain more specific feedback from each group (Ring).

After conducting her research, Ring determined that the Big Dish event was a success with nearly all participants responding that they were willing to attend similar future events. In addition to this, the event’s fundraising goal was surpassed, having made a profit of $15,065 which exceeded the goal by around $5000. The survey results also displayed event success, with an average score of 4.63 on a 5-point scale. The event was also seen as successful due to the high proportion of those in the Hospitality Industry that attended the event, which allowed for recognition of the program and further fundraising. This was attributed in part to networking (Ring 21-23).

Another outcome of Ring’s research was documentation for organizing Big Dish and other similar hospitality events for future years; Appendix F includes a timeline that provides insight for when some key actions should be accomplished. Appendix G includes an outline for how future Big Dish committees should be structured as well as their respective responsibilities. Concerns that arose when planning and conducting the event as well as potential solutions were described in Appendix H. Ring also discussed the significance of the participant feedback in helping to plan future events, provided in Appendixes D and E.

In my opinion, the research Ring conducted may seem unremarkable to many, but it is vital to the success of Ohio State’s Hospitality Management program. The Big Dish event continues to this day, and other events put on by the program such as Hospitality Listens seem to draw inspiration from it. In my intro to hospitality class, the example of Big Dish is used to model what is necessary to plan out and run an event. Ring’s research and resulting documentation could continuously be used as a template to plan new events that are of similar scale to Big Dish, whether they occur inside of the Hospitality program or not.

Ring’s research wasn’t perfect, however. At times, her methods and explanation came off as repetitive, which made her thesis more difficult to read. Additionally, while surveys can provide valuable information to those who administer them, there is always a potential for answers to be inaccurate; the event’s high satisfaction rating could’ve been rather high simply due to the attendees not wanting to provide a negative account of the event, and not because of actual satisfaction. Another difficulty of the survey method was accountability; Ring admitted that it would be likely for there to be much less of a response on a survey emailed out a week later to all participants, versus a paper one handed to them at the event.

If I were to replicate this study, I’d focus on making the survey portion of the research as accurate as possible. I do agree with the idea of having two different surveys for evaluating feedback during and after the event and would plan on continuing with it. I would make sure to allocate time during the event solely for the survey to ensure maximum participation. I’d also continue with the prize basket idea to encourage participation. For the online survey, I would work with professors in the Hospitality program to make its completion a mandatory, graded requirement for the students who attended. For both surveys, I’d heavily emphasize that there are no wrong answers and feedback, good, or bad, is greatly appreciated.

As for future research on driving satisfaction at Hospitality events, I’d like to see a similar thesis conducted on the Hospitality program’s other signature event, Hospitality Listens. While it isn’t as much of a fundraising event as Big Dish, I’d like to see what can be done to encourage more families to come back to the dinner year-after-year.