

Revealing One of the Area's Best-Kept Secrets

Situation

In late 1982 members of the news media referred to the 25-year-old Hennepin County Park Reserve District as the area's best-kept secret. That was meant partially as a compliment – the 25,000 acres of parkland that had been acquired represented a high quality natural resource. But it was also meant as a criticism – the agency had done little to let taxpayers know they owned and had access to these wonderful resources. **David Kostik** was hired as Public Relations and Marketing Manager to help change that situation. The park agency faced significant challenges. Preserving the integrity of large tracts of public land during the midst of rapid urban growth would require significant public support, as would preserving funding to maintain and operate the park system. Building public support meant creating broader awareness, encouraging people to visit the park system for the first time, and turning first-time visitors into supporters.



Approach

To succeed in increasing use of the park system, change needed to happen in three major areas: facilities needed to be developed in a way that better suited public interest; programming needed to be developed with appeal to broader audiences; and communication with the public needed to be improved. As a member of the Marketing Steering Team, Mr. Kostik played a key role in changing all three areas. The first step in the change process aimed at internal agency staff – people who had focused on resource management needed to focus on customer needs and customer service. Internal education efforts created understanding of a need for change and taught basic principles of customer-centered marketing principles. With broad staff involvement, the Marketing Steering Team developed a comprehensive plan based on marketing research that touched on all three areas of change – facilities, programming and communications. The plan won approval of the agency's board of commissioners and implementation began with creation of a new identity: Hennepin Parks. Programming emphasis was placed on topics with broad public appeal and on making programming available to large groups of people. During this period, Hennepin Parks launched an extremely popular, large-scale special event – the Carp Festival at Coon Rapids Dam Regional Park. Facilities were created and marketed that appeal successfully to organizations looking for places to host company-sponsored picnics. And an aggressive public relations and advertising effort brought word of these changes to the public.

Results

During 1986, park use increased 31 percent over the previous year, with revenue from daily parking permits keeping pace with that increase. Sales of annual parking permits in 1986 increased about 46 percent over 1985. A December 1986 study of public awareness of Hennepin Parks indicated a 12 percent increase from 1985 in the number of people who had visited the park system. The name "Hennepin Parks" became part of the landscape — it's no longer a well-kept secret.