



Marketing Healthy Marriage Programs to Married Couples

The preventive nature of healthy marriage programs poses a challenge to facilitators trying to recruit participants. That challenge involves answering the following question: How do you convince busy married couples to invest time in something that they don't think they need?

Marriage education programs are unfamiliar to many people and those that are familiar often have misconceptions. Married couples often think that marriage education is only for people in distressed marriages. Further, they may be afraid that others will think they have marital problems if they participate. This attitude, coupled with the reality that people are busy with children, makes it challenging for interested participants to sign up for your program. This is why it is important to develop a strong marketing strategy well in advance of the start of your program. Successful marketing can help convince potential participants of your program's value and confirm that it is worth investing their time. Below are some suggestions that you should consider in developing your marketing strategy.

- **Identify your population** – Different people respond to different messages. The experiences of many successful programs indicate that targeted marketing is often most effective. Think about who the target population is for your program. Some examples might be new parents, Hispanic couples or couples with children. Identifying your target population will help you decide what marketing methods and what message will be most effective. For instance, if you are trying to recruit new parents, you will likely be more successful placing flyers in child birth classes than if you distribute them in high schools.

Some program operators feel that they are limiting their potential impact by narrowing their focus to a particular group of couples. Keep in mind that most programs have limited funding and can not be everything to everyone. Targeting a population does not mean that you will not allow other couples to participate. It simply gives you a place to focus your efforts and resources. This approach allows you to be efficient in your marketing and recruitment strategies. If you keep your target population broad, be aware that you may need to work even harder to interest married couples in your program. Additionally, you may want to craft multiple marketing materials or recruitment strategies that are aimed at different groups.



- **Marketing methods** – There are many avenues available to advertise your program to couples including but not limited to flyers and brochures, newspapers, TV, radio, community organizations, schools and word of mouth. People sometimes need to see information about a program or service multiple times before they decide to explore it further. Make sure that you use as many different marketing strategies as possible.

You should also consider which of these options will be most effective for your chosen population. Identify trusted community resources to help you spread the word about your program. Potential community organizations that may distribute your brochures, allow you to make a presentation to families or give you space in their newsletter include:

- ✓ Churches
- ✓ Ministerial Alliances
- ✓ Head Start and Early Head Start
- ✓ Schools (public and private)
- ✓ Locally owned stores/restaurants with a focus on giving back to the community
- ✓ Parent associations

Think about other organizations in your community that serve your population and build relationships with them. If you are targeting parents with young children, a Head Start program might be able to publicize your program to its parents or refer couples to you.

Select appropriate community organizations and invest time in nurturing those relationships instead of trying to broadly disseminate your limited resources such as brochures. Identify organizations with the greatest connection to your target population.

The more glamorous methods of advertising, like TV and radio, may or may not be the most useful. While TV and radio reach a very broad population, it is difficult to craft an effective message unless you know who your audience will be. Your programs may have access to free air time through community radio programming, local cable stations or public television. Sometimes public service announcements (PSAs) can be run that advertise your program or a program manager may have an opportunity to talk about your program on air. The cost of doing this is upfront. You may need to record a PSA (either audio or visual) or research the radio/TV/cable program that you are invited to speak on.



Request the stations' listenership or viewership demographics. This will give you an indication of their typical audience and help you identify if they would be a good fit to advertise your program. Also make sure that you are prepared to handle an influx of calls. You may need someone to answer calls whenever the announcement or program airs and should be prepared to explain and/or enroll people. Finally, know that even if you create a PSA and have local programs that offer to air it, you have no control over when or how often it will air.

- ***Crafting your message*** – Once you know how you can reach your population, think about what kind of message will resonate most. People generally respond better to the benefits of a program than its features. Talk about what benefits participants will get out of your program rather than logistical details of the program. An example of a logistical detail would be informing participants that the program uses a particular curriculum or that participants must attend six two-hour classes.

Four solid examples of benefits of a healthy marriage program are:

1. improved communication
2. time with your spouse
3. making friends with other couples
4. having fun

It is easy to see that benefits are more appealing than details when marketing a program.

Once you have identified your program's benefits, try to talk to potential participants in a way that will appeal to them. Be sure to use language that is friendly, appealing, and easy to understand. For example, you might say "Have fun with other married couples" instead of "Develop a broader social support network". Emphasize the preventive nature of healthy marriage programs so that couples don't feel like there is something wrong with them if they attend. You could compare couples participation to getting a marriage check-up much like they would get a physical at the doctor. You can also encourage couples to build an even stronger marriage which implies that they are already have a good relationship, but want to enhance it. Couples are often attracted to healthy marriage programs because they want to do what's best for their children. You might use phrases like "What's best for you is best for them" or "A stronger marriage means a stronger family" to convey that couples will be helping their children by coming to your program.



One way to get some ideas about what kinds of messages will be most effective with your population is to ask the couples themselves. If you have some couples who have already been through your program, ask them questions like what they liked most about the program, what interested them about it in the first place or where they heard about your program. In fact, if the couple is really enthusiastic about their experience, you can even incorporate their quotes as testimonials in your marketing materials or ask them to be to help you recruit other couples.

- **Cultural sensitivity** – It is important to recognize that different marketing methods and messages will appeal more to different cultures. Word-of-mouth marketing and in-person recruitment by staff members who are part of the community may be the most effective options. There are several simple things you can do to make your marketing efforts to the community. Use diverse pictures reflecting a range of ages, parenting and ethnic backgrounds. Use culturally appealing language as well that is sensitive. Have a variety of people review your marketing materials that represent the diversity that you are trying to reach with your message. Incorporate their best feedback before going to press the materials.

These suggestions are meant to provide examples of some of the implications that culture can have in informing your marketing strategy, but every population's culture is unique. Take some time to think about your target population's culture and what it might imply for marketing your program. This is another area where it could be useful to reach out to couples in the community for their reactions to potential marketing materials or methods. You can also look at the websites for ACF's African American Healthy Marriage Initiative, Hispanic Healthy Marriage Initiative, and others at www.acf.hhs.gov/healthymarriage/index.html for more resources.

- **Appeal to men** – Many organizations and agencies often offer programs mostly for women and children. Men are not used to being included in programming and may feel apprehensive about participating. Given that healthy marriage programs are often intended for couples and are most effective when both members of the couple participate, it is crucial that you make a targeted effort to market your program to men as well as women. Generally women may be more open to the idea of a marriage workshop, so it is strategic to think about the methods and messages you can use to focus on men. For example, you might hand out brochures at local sporting events, barber shops or work with a local Employee Assistance or Employment Program to provide some referrals. Your marketing materials could use metaphors that compare a marriage education program to getting a tune-up for your car or going to the gym for a workout, which indicate the preventive nature of the program. Also, materials could underscore the skills (e.g., more effective communication, conflict



resolution, anger management) that they would learn which they could apply to their marriage as well as to other facets of their life like work. You could also emphasize the importance of fathers and that having a strong marriage is part of being a good father. You may also want to consider the placement of your marketing materials when reaching out to men.

- ***Sustaining interest*** – Remember that people usually need to see information multiple times before they really absorb it. Advertising your program in one place or doing one round of a marketing campaign is not enough. You should plan to market your program consistently in multiple places over time. Also, keep track of where participants hear about your program and what caught their attention so that you can identify which parts of your strategy are more successful and adjust accordingly. Lastly, remember that word of mouth is an invaluable marketing tool. In order to grow interest in you program it needs to be engaging and useful. Married couples may not be the easiest population to target but if people have a great experience in your program they will recommend it to their friends. This is one of the best marketing strategies you can employ.