



**national
healthy marriage
resource center**

Marketing and Outreach in Hispanic Communities: A Case Study of the Hispanic Active Relationship Project (HARP)



Overview

This Case Study examines successful approaches to conducting marketing and outreach for healthy relationship and marriage education (MRE) services for Hispanic communities. The Hispanic Active Relationship Project (HARP) in Cameron County, Texas, has developed unique marketing, outreach and recruitment strategies to engage Hispanic communities and encourage participation in marriage and relationship education services.

Methodology

Interviews were conducted with HARP program staff, including the Founder and Executive Director; the Cameron County Site Director; the Associate Director of Public Relations and Training; a Couples Education Specialist; and the Bookkeeping and Marketing Specialist. Demographic data and progress report information were also reviewed. Based on these sources, this Case Study includes a description of marketing and outreach strategies and provides an overview of lessons learned and program implementation.

Background

The HARP Project was first established by the Active Relationships Center in seven cities (Austin, Brownsville, Corpus Christi, Dallas, Fort Worth, and Houston) as a healthy marriage outreach initiative specifically for Hispanics in Texas. Part of the initial project involved a pilot study and evaluation of the curriculum which was conducted by Baylor University School of Social Work.¹ In 2006, following the pilot study of the seven sites, the HARP Project was awarded federal funding through the Office of Family Assistance and narrowed the scope of its service area to Cameron County.

Cameron County is the southernmost county of the state of Texas and borders Mexico. It is one of the poorest counties in the United States and Hispanic residents make up approximately 86% of the population,² the majority of whom are of Mexican heritage. At the time that HARP established its program, the community was experiencing low income and education levels, and high divorce and teen pregnancy rates. According to U.S. Census data, at the onset of HARP's program:

- 78% of the county spoke Spanish at home³
- Approximately 31% of families were below the poverty level (compared to 10% nationally)⁴
- 29% of the adult population had less than a 9th grade education⁵
- 6.7% of people over 15 years were divorced⁶ and
- The teen pregnancy rate for Hispanics/Latinas in Texas' border counties (which include Cameron County) was 72 per 1,000 births compared to the national rate of 18.2 per 1,000 births⁷

HARP understood the importance the Hispanic community places on building trusting relationships. Early on, the program adopted a "long-term approach" to serving couples and families. This approach helped establish HARP as a trusted organization committed to the community as well as reduced skepticism that participating in services came with a "catch" or would interfere with an individual's immigration status.

Since 2006, HARP has been delivering healthy marriage education services to Hispanics in Cameron County. HARP's program objectives are to build relationship education skills in the Hispanic community by "strengthening existing marriages, preparing those considering marriage, or helping those who are not married and who have children together to establish stable co-parenting relationships for their children."⁸ The program aims to address the struggles that often occur in relationships among immigrant families due to stressors experienced when adjusting to a new culture as well as the challenges faced by more acculturated Hispanic couples of Mexican heritage.

- Churches
- School districts
- Child protective services
- Domestic violence organizations
- Court systems
- Local businesses
- Detention centers
- Public officials
- Community colleges



"Strengthening existing marriages, preparing those considering marriage, or helping those who are not married and who have children together to establish stable co-parenting relationships for their children."

Program Model

The following section provides an overview of the HARP program model and the curriculum offered to Hispanics in Cameron County. The HARP Project provides services to youth, engaged couples, and married individuals/couples, as well as offers a mentor program. The program conducts direct recruitment via marketing and media efforts and works with other organizations in the community which act as referral partners. HARP's referral partner organizations include agencies such as:

The curriculum is in Spanish and English and is tailored to be culturally relevant by integrating culturally appropriate examples and analogies. The curriculum is delivered at HARP's facility as well as onsite at community partners' facilities (i.e. churches, cultural and community centers, Head Start locations, and schools).

The program has three bilingual staff members who serve as facilitators and/or trainers. HARP's staff members train employees at partner organizations to deliver MRE to their clients and/or provide MRE directly to participants referred to their program. Some community organizations utilize their own staff and coordinate several workshops during a calendar year. However, the majority of HARP's partner organizations choose to refer participants to HARP for MRE. Although HARP staff members deliver most of the services, by offering the

community a choice, the program was able to build trust and ownership in the program. HARP offers a variety of workshops which are led by either one facilitator or a male/female team and are offered in English and Spanish:

1. *Active Choices* helps couples learn communication skills, anger management and the importance of choices (8 hours).
2. *Active Marriage* teaches topics such as conflict resolution, communication skills and “keeping the relationship fresh” (8 hours).
3. *Active Money Personalities* covers all aspects of managing family finances for pre-marital and married couples as well as individuals (12 hours).
4. *Romance and Intimacy* (weekend retreat for couples who have participated in at least two other workshops) focuses on achieving deeper intimacy and is offered at South Padre Island at a hotel resort (12 hours).
5. *Active Living* is for married couples and parents and highlights the importance of family togetherness and developing traditions (8 hours).
6. *Active Adults* is for single parents, individuals and parents of youth participating in HARP’s program. It focuses on a variety of topics related to romantic relationships as well as family and professional relationships (12 hours).
7. *Active Relationships for Young Adults* teaches relationship skills that are important in life - whether at school, work or home - for young adults of high school age (12 hours).

In addition to the seven workshops, HARP provides training to mentor couples from the community who

invite other “mentee” couples to participate in one-on-one discussions. Conversations between the mentor and mentee couples are guided by a workbook which contains topics to talk about as well as activities for couples to complete at home each week. The participants meet on a regular basis, alternating meetings at a restaurant and at another location of their choice (i.e. mentor/mentee’s home, park, etc.). Couples complete the mentor program by attending six sessions with their mentor couple.

Marketing and Outreach Strategies

The essence of an effective marketing strategy is its relevance to the target audience. In the case of HARP, the strategy had to be *culturally relatable*. HARP worked to develop an outreach strategy that was relevant to Cameron County’s Hispanic population by drawing on their knowledge of the culture to balance the organization’s limited track record in the community. The following section describes HARP’s experience developing and utilizing marketing strategies to reach Hispanics of Mexican heritage in Cameron County.

Dealing with Misconceptions

As a relatively new organization in a community where relationship education was not a common service, HARP knew that it needed to educate the community about MRE services and gain trust as an organization. The program had to work to convince the community that marriage education was not the same as counseling and that participants would not be “airing their dirty laundry.” This later became one of the key messages staff conveyed when doing outreach in the community.

One of HARP's first unique outreach efforts was the development of a humorous play to help educate the community. In 2007, nationally renowned writer and actor, Rick Najera, wrote a play, "I do...Most of the Time," to create awareness about marriage and relationship education and the services provided by HARP. The program hired an acting troupe from Austin and the play was performed multiple times in both English and Spanish. The program performed the play in two different locations (including a mall and a local theater) and averaged between 30 and 50 audience members per performance.

The play depicted four Hispanic couples attending a marriage education workshop and gave the audience an idea of what they could expect from HARP's services. The couples portrayed in the play reflected the community and addressed many of the myths and misconceptions couples might have had about marriage education. The cast included couples of varying ages to demonstrate that the services were for couples in all stages of their relationships and that marriage education is not just for couples whose relationships are in distress. The humorous dialogue kept the performance light and showed the audience that the workshops are fun and informative. The dialogue also helped illustrate that marriage education is not just geared toward women and that male participants are treated with respect. During each performance, HARP distributed a sign-up sheet for couples wanting additional information about upcoming workshops.

HARP created a video of the original play and planned to use the video as a training tool for other groups in the community interested in producing the play. HARP staff worked to engage pastors and leaders in the faith community to produce the play at churches as part of marriage celebration days or other special occasions. This initial outreach was



targeted toward clergy members because churches and faith leaders are typically highly regarded within the Hispanic culture. HARP learned that the community was much more receptive to MRE services when respected church leaders voiced their support and/or recommended that couples attend. Although HARP was correct in anticipating support from the faith community, the program found that instead of producing the play themselves, churches preferred to play the recorded video as an introduction to a workshop held at the church or at the HARP facility. The video helped to dispel misconceptions about MRE services and gain trust in the community. HARP continues to use the video when reaching out to potential participants and partner agencies as a way to provide them with a "sample" of what the services are like.

Additional, shorter video clips were also developed and added to the program's website for potential participants to reference to better understand HARP's program and what they could expect from a workshop.

[Video Clip 1](#)

[Video Clip 2](#)

Establishing trust and demonstrating a commitment to the community

HARP understood that as a new organization targeting the Hispanic community, building trust was imperative. As previously mentioned, trust is an important value held in the Hispanic culture, and HARP had to implement a program that demonstrated its commitment to couples and families for the long-term.

Equally challenging was gaining the trust of local leaders, professionals and elected officials. The program made, and continues to make, outreach to other community programs a priority. Program staff regularly conducts presentations to referral agencies. For example, staff has presented at the school district's annual *Parental Involvement Conference* three years in a row, which has helped the program develop rapport with school officials, teachers, and parents. HARP has designated one staff person to focus on outreach for youth, and this strategy has allowed the program to build trust with young people in the community as well as the adults who support them (i.e. parents, teachers, principals, and pastors).

HARP also convenes bi-annual Agency Referral Meetings. The meetings include current and prospective referral organizations. During these meetings, the program provides a description of its services and how they are different from

counseling. They do a workshop demonstration, have organizations complete workshop exercises to show the "program in action," and include testimonials from other referral agencies. They distribute a survey at the end of the meeting that asks questions about stumbling blocks/barriers to the organization being a referral agency and what HARP can do to address these barriers. The HARP staff *continually follows up with their referral network* and attends the community events provided by referral partners to demonstrate their commitment to the community.

Making a name and establishing a reputation in the community



In order to generate interest in its services and to create awareness about the organization, HARP produced advertisements for billboards and radio. All were produced in English and Spanish and used culturally relevant messages. As new advertisements were released, HARP tracked spikes in the number of contacts/registrations received as well as polled registrants on how they heard about the program. These efforts indicated that billboards were the most successful marketing strategy in Cameron County. Furthermore,

the most successful ad for the program was a billboard that read “Save Your Marriage” or “Salva tu Matrimonio.” Another success was a billboard advertising the Romance and Intimacy weekend retreat. Other billboard ads included “Join the Marriage Movement” or “Únete Al Movimiento Matrimonial.” HARP staff attribute the success of the billboards to the fact that through much of Cameron County there is one major thoroughfare, and the community notices new advertisements with a clearly defined logo and simple messages. The billboard advertisements helped create a “buzz” about the new organization and its services, and the community looked forward to the new messages that HARP would display on its billboards.

The program began establishing itself as a reputable organization throughout Cameron County, and much of that had to do with the staff’s ability to communicate, via the media, in a way that is significant to the Hispanic community. HARP staff members are trained on how to leverage the media (called “*media coaching*”). For example, they are trained to do radio interviews and on the importance of not using formal language like “marriage education” but rather describing the program as an opportunity to learn about different personality types, skills for communicating, and attitudes about money. As part of media coaching, the program uses role-playing, and outreach teams are provided scripts to be used in client outreach and recruitment. Scripts are developed based on staff member experiences that have been successful in client recruitment and then shared with other staff as an approach to “mimic.”

Engaging males

Many Hispanic families observe a more patriarchal structure, and getting men from the family to “buy in” to a service or activity is crucial. Gaining the

support of males helps to not only engage the men’s partners, but makes recruiting other men more likely.⁹ The HARP program understands this cultural nuance and is intentional about how they [connect with Hispanic men](#). Although HARP was able to successfully recruit program participants in the early years with a mainly female staff, recruitment became much more successful when male staff members were hired. The program also involves male facilitators doing outreach to existing and potential partner organizations.

Males are a focus point of all radio ads and the play, “I do...Most of the Time” was particularly engaging for men. They responded well to the play and realized that the workshops are something fun (and free) to do with their spouse. Throughout the play, references to refreshments (specifically “pan dulce”) were made, which is something that initially attracted men to the workshops.

Sponsoring community events

HARP hosts *Matrimonio Magnifico*, an annual event open to the community. The event is publicized through TV stations and on the community calendar. Anyone from the community may nominate a couple who they feel has a “magnificent marriage.” Some of the nominated couples are couples who have participated in the HARP program, but the majority of the couples are nominated by the community. The program uses the event to model successful marriages in the community and to recruit mentor couples for the program. The event is also an opportunity for referral partners to speak about the benefits of the program. For example, one year a local detention center official spoke about how crime has dropped in their institution since participants have gone through the program.¹⁰

HARP's Youth Rally is another community event offered each year to engage students who may not have the opportunity to participate in a workshop at their school. The Youth Rally is generally held on a Saturday and youth receive a full day (eight hours) of relationship education. HARP utilizes more traditional marketing materials to help promote the Youth Rally. Many students participating in the program at school receive a HARP t-shirt displaying a trendy, youth-focused design. Students wear these t-shirts at school and in the community which helps promote the program and the Youth Rally by word-of-mouth, as the design generally serves as a conversation starter.



Lessons Learned

The experience the HARP program has gained over the years marketing to the Hispanic community of Cameron County has been extensive. The following are some key lessons that continue to inform their outreach strategies.

1. Radio ads are most successful if they appeal to men. Initially, the program used a male/female dating couple. A follow-up radio spot used two males, each talking about his relationship with his girlfriend and their experience with the HARP program. The second radio spot was much more successful. The program monitored the time of day that the new

radio ads aired and collected data on the number of phone calls and website hits that were made following the airing. They also tracked how many of these inquiries resulted in workshop registrations and actual workshop attendance. HARP feels that the approach of using two male voices worked because it communicated to the male audience that the program was also for them. The program found that the ads using two male voices encouraged women to approach their partners about attending services. Women explained that they thought that their partners might be open to participating since other men were talking about their experience.

2. Marketing strategies should have a tangible recruitment payoff. As HARP established itself in Cameron County, several marketing strategies were employed through trial and error. For example, the program initially planned on hosting golf tournaments to recruit participants, but determined that it would have been costly to the program and may not have been an accessible activity to many Hispanic couples. Similarly, the program ran commercials in movie theaters with little result. The staff learned that while it is often necessary to think creatively about marketing and outreach strategies, it is imperative to understand the community and use what works effectively so that efforts result in good recruitment numbers.

The program learned it is imperative to understand the community and use what works effectively so that efforts result in a tangible recruitment payoff.

3. How participants learned about the program should be tracked. Some of the program's challenges in marketing strategies may have been avoided if they had implemented an in-depth system

to track how participants learned of the program from the beginning. This information was tracked for visitors of the website (end-users received a prompt asking how they heard about the website), but a more comprehensive system for tracking this information would have helped direct the program's marketing funds to strategies it now knows to be most successful (billboards, promotional items generating word of mouth, and radio ads/interviews).

4. Establishing trust in the community takes time. As a new organization, HARP accepted any invitation to be involved in community events. These events (i.e. health fairs, etc.) were initially viewed as an outlet to recruit participants. However, the program learned that they better served as opportunities to build trust and establish credibility among other service-providers targeting their population. Early in the program, staff may have attended two to three community events per month to establish relationships with other organizations that later became referral partners. Similarly, hosting gatherings on a regular basis for current and potential referral partners allowed the staff to build rapport with other agencies. Because these gatherings offered a sample of the program, partner agencies developed a sense of security about HARP.

5. Use a curriculum designed for the audience. Prior to receiving federal funding, HARP was able to pilot test the curriculum through the Baylor University evaluation. This was a crucial step as they knew the curriculum would resonate with the Hispanic community of Cameron County before the program began. The curriculum acknowledges the challenges that Hispanics may face and provides skills and strategies to help individuals and couples move forward without engaging in high levels of conflict. Furthermore, all of the curriculum components are offered in English and

Spanish and contain examples, scenarios and "dichos" or sayings that a population of Hispanics of predominantly Mexican descent can relate to. During the first year of the program, HARP also implemented a video-based curriculum as part of the program. They quickly learned that their Hispanic community did not respond to a video format and that they preferred the relational setting of a workshop where there was interaction with facilitators and other couples. This preference is reflective of the cultural values of "familismo" and "allocentrism" which place more emphasis on the needs of and interactions with the extended family and community over those of the individual couple.¹¹

6. The length of the workshop is important. The program found more success offering the workshop as a one day/eight hour block, during which they serve lunch and provide childcare. Many of their participants work multiple jobs seven days a week, so finding time to devote to a lengthy workshop can be difficult. The program found that they were more successful at getting participants to attend the one day (eight hour) workshop format than workshops that spanned several different meeting times. Participants commented that it was easier for them to request one day off from work than several days over a period of several weeks. However, once couples complete the eight hour workshop, they are usually more motivated to attend another workshop, including a weekend retreat which covers eight, 10 or 12 hours of curriculum.

7. The messenger matters. While HARP was initially able to recruit couples with a mainly female staff, they found their efforts to be much more successful and attendance to be much higher when Hispanic men were involved with recruitment and workshop facilitation. The program also found that the most well-attended classes are those in which a married

couple facilitates, and that Hispanic men are more receptive to attending the program and receiving the curriculum information when it comes from another man. Utilizing facilitators who have a shared cultural heritage, as well as relate to the experiences of both men and women, has been most successful for the HARP program.

Conclusion

The key to successfully serving the Hispanic community is building a relationship of trust with couples *and* other service providers, addressing misconceptions that the community may have about the program, and being direct about what the program is (and is not). Program staff must leverage organizations that are trusted by the community and engage (and continually re-engage) them in partnerships. Marketing strategies, program staff, and the curriculum must be culturally relevant and respectful of the culture's beliefs and traditions. Flexibility in marketing approaches, tracking the success of outreach efforts, re-purposing tools as needed, and continually assessing the "return on investment" of marketing and outreach strategies so that adjustments can be made, can help ensure a program is meeting the needs of the community.

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Endnotes

- 1 See <http://www.baylor.edu/pr/newsphp?action=story&story=44787>
- 2 U.S. Census Bureau. Retrieved on October 29, 2010 from <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/48/48061.html>
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- 7 Health and Human Services Health Resources and Services Administration. Border County Health Workforce Profiles: Texas. Retrieved on October 29, 2010 from <http://bhpr.hrsa.gov/healthworkforce/border/texas/highlights.htm>
- 8 More information about the program can be found by visiting their website: http://www.activerelationships.com/ar_hispanic_overviewhmi.htm
- 9 Also see NHMRC Tip Sheet Appealing to Hispanic Men (Migrant Workers): Strategies for Recruitment and Engagement in Marriage Education <http://www.healthymarriageinfo.org/docs/appealingtohispanicmen.pdf>
- 10 To hear the full remarks visit <http://www.harppcc.com/mediacenter.php>
- 11 Administration for Children and Families Hispanic Healthy Marriage Initiative. Cultural Adaptation and Relationship Dynamics. Retrieved on November 2, 2010 from http://www.acf.hhs.gov/healthymarriage/pdf/Cultural_Adaptation.pdf