



How to Write Strong Objectives

Developing objectives are vital for non-profit organizations. From strategic planning to evaluating program effectiveness and writing grant proposals, objectives are a mainstay. Most know that objectives are used to focus us, inform us of desired results, and motivate us towards a common goal. In fact, when considering funding an organization many donors, whether organizational or individual, view project or program impact and outcomes as critical components.

Perhaps you are familiar with the S.M.A.R.T. acronym, generally accepted to have been coined in 1981 by George T. Doran (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SMART_criteria). S.M.A.R.T. commonly stands for Specific, Measurable, Assignable, Relevant and Time-Related. In developing objectives for a variety of organizations over the years, I have found that it is a struggle for many. Although people can usually articulate what they want to achieve, they often find the “Big M”- making the objective measurable a challenge.

What exactly makes an objective measurable? Quantification does. Numeric data allows us to demonstrate progress towards meeting objectives. A typical objective many organizations have is to serve a specific number of people at an event or program(s). For instance, an objective for a senior nutrition education program may read: *To serve 250 seniors through nutritional educational programs*. Simply written and clear. But it does not meet the S.M.A.R.T. criteria, and most significantly, it neglects impact. Why is it important that seniors attend the education program?

You may say it’s important because improved nutrition is related to enhanced health and hospital stays happen less frequently if seniors eat nutritious meals. Fewer hospital stays mean lower health care costs. Fantastic! Now let’s translate that impact into objectives:

- (1) For 90% of seniors participating in next fiscal year’s senior services department’s nutrition education workshops to show increased nutrition education knowledge.
- (2) For 80% of seniors participating in next fiscal year’s senior services department’s nutrition education workshops to report that they are using the skills and knowledge learned.
- (3) For 80% of seniors participating in next fiscal year’s senior services department’s nutrition education workshops to report improved nutrition and enhanced health after using the skills and knowledge learned for a minimum of six months.
- (4) For the seniors who participate in next fiscal year’s senior services department’s nutrition education workshops to report fewer, if any, hospital stays and of shorter duration for specific nutrition-related illnesses* within six months of completing the program as compared to available county data.

**For example, nutrition-related illnesses may include diabetes and heart disease but would not include a hospital visit due to a dog bite or sprained ankle.*

Do the objectives meet the S.M.A.R.T. criteria? Happily, yes, all the criteria were met.

- ✓ Specific- includes who will be served (seniors) and how (nutrition education workshops)
- ✓ Measurable- includes a quantifiable target (percentage of increased knowledge and skills learned and used, self-reported improved nutrition and enhanced health, and number of hospital stays)
- ✓ Assignable- the objectives are assigned to the senior services department
- ✓ Relevant- specifies the outcomes desired (increased knowledge and skills learned and used, self-reported improved nutrition and enhanced health, and lack of hospital stays)
- ✓ Time- Related- includes a specific time-period (next fiscal year).

Adding specific objectives requires resources. If they do not already exist, tools need to be developed to collect this information and then the information must be tabulated and analyzed. For the first goal (1), organizations would need the nutrition educator to implement existing or develop pre and post-assessment tools for senior participants to complete. Seniors would complete the pre-assessment tool before attending the nutrition education program thus determining their baseline knowledge of nutrition topics. A post-assessment tool would be used to determine if participants have increased their nutrition knowledge.

Moreover, a survey tool could be developed to determine if objectives two (2) and three (3) were met. Additional questions could determine if participants are using the skills and knowledge learned in the education program and if they report improved nutrition and enhanced health six months after program completion. The survey could also be used to determine if the fourth (4) goal was met by including questions related to hospital visits. Many organizations develop their own measurement tools, but if you need assistance visit the American Evaluation Association website (www.eval.org) to identify potential consultants.

It is important to mention that in the example above, data yielded from objectives two through four was from self-reports by the senior participants. According to an article on the US National Library of Medicine National Institutes of Health website, “Self-report is one of the most widely used methods of collecting information regarding individuals’ health status and utilization of healthcare services.” Researchers have found that self-reported data are accurate when individuals understand the questions and respondents can remain anonymous. As such, it behooves survey designers to keep surveys anonymous when possible and to carefully word questions and even test them among potential respondents ahead of time. For question three (3), one could also consider a trained staff member to record specific health determinants, such as blood pressure and weight measurements both before and after the nutrition education program.

In short, the data from these outcomes reveal not just the number of seniors who participated in the nutrition education program but what impact that program has for them and the greater community. In addition, using percentages in the objectives is useful in demonstrating the desired change and make the information more understandable than when using raw values.

Finally, when reporting on your goals, it can be helpful to relate the outcomes to specific stories about who your organization impacted and how. Numeric data is key, but narratives bring the numbers to life! Furthermore, even when you don’t reach an objective, reporting the information is still valuable, as long as you also identify the challenges, share what was learned, and offer potential remedies. In fact, it may be a great opportunity for your constituent groups to step up to help.

For assistance with developing strong objectives whether it is in relation to strategic planning, grant proposals or programming, please contact Maddy at maddyschiering@sheerstrategy.com or at (215) 680-0684.