

# Captivating Interest at Small-Scale Equine Events

Honors Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
University Honors Program  
Colorado State University

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Fall Semester, 2025

### Abstract:

Attendance at the Right Horse Showcase—an event organized for students in ANEQ205 where they gain knowledge and valuable opportunities to work with horses from diverse backgrounds, and later offer them up for adoption - has been relatively small in recent years. Previous research suggests that several variables influence attendance, including competition with other events, weather conditions, cost, entertainment value, and the effectiveness of media outreach. Emotional engagement and the choice of facility also play important roles. These factors are further supported by organizations such as the American Wild Horse Conservation, which generated \$4 million following significant revisions to their advertising and marketing strategies. This paper explores how a comprehensive marketing approach may improve engagement and increase attendance, and includes an example of a marketing application for the Right Horse Showcase.

Throughout my time at Colorado State University, I have been grateful to participate in and attend many unique equine events at the B.W. Pickett Arena. However, I have often wondered, why do certain events attract so many more people? Adoption events, educational events, and sports such as equestrian vaulting and mounted shooting generate significantly less revenue and attract fewer members of the public in comparison to other equine events. In particular, The Right Horse Showcase, in comparison to other events hosted by the CSU Equine Science program, has been relatively small. The Legends of Ranching Performance Horse Sale (LOR), which is also free to attend and open to the public, typically draws more than 400 people; however, the showcase often sees only around 50 faces in the stands. What are the factors contributing to this disparity in attendance and revenue generation? What could be some solutions to relieving this disparity and elevating the profiles of the less successful events?

The Right Horse Showcase is an event organized for students in ANEQ205, where they gain knowledge and valuable opportunities to work with horses from a variety of backgrounds, including neglect, abuse, and those with behavioral issues, and then offer them up for adoption. The Right Horse program has been in operation since 2016. The program has a positive impact on the larger issues within our equine industry of dealing with unwanted horses. While an event like this is not a permanent fix, it is a step in the right direction.

The LOR program has been in operation since 2006. Similar to Right Horse, it is advertised as a program that fosters hands-on experiential learning with horses for students. While there are many unique aspects of their program, a few elements are particularly noticeable, including the level of student contribution, marketing and event

logistics, the duration of horse training before the event, the desirability of the animal, and the wealth of the customer.

Student contribution is higher due to their involvement in other classes directly related to the program, such as Sales Preparation. In this class, students develop “behind the scenes” skills, where they learn about and take responsibility for the marketing, advertising, sponsorships, social media, and logistics of this event. This allows for the delegation of tasks and enlists close to twenty additional people in running the Sale. This boost in labor allows the event to run smoothly and efficiently. Unfortunately, this is not something that is available to the other equine programs.

As regards to marketing and advertising, one key difference between the two programs is their social media outreach. In today’s society, the general public spends many hours a day on digital devices, in particular on social media. For instance, on the Instagram platform, Right Horse has 438 followers, and last posted on April 29th, 2020. In comparison, the Legends of Ranching page has 1,851 followers and has posted within the last 24 hours. The LOR profile posts anywhere between twice a day and every couple of days, and in comparison, when the Right Horse profile was still active, they posted five times throughout March. This stark contrast can explain, in part, why there are fewer people attached to and in-the-know about the Right Horse program - they are not easily able to keep up with the latest Right Horse news, trending issues, or know about interesting stories unless directly participating in the class or by word of mouth.

LOR students spend an entire year with their colts. Having a longer time to work with their horses allows for a longer lead time for advertising and publicity. It also gives the students more time to work with and refine their horses’ skills, making the horses

more marketable and presentable to the public. In the Right Horse program, the students only work with their horses for a single semester. If students take the course in the fall, they also face more weather conflicts, which also limits training time.

Across the two programs, there is strong differentiation in the attractiveness of horses. The students in the LOR program are working with nicely bred horses out of well-known dams and sires, whereas most horses that end up in the rescue do not come in with this paperwork. The colts enter without previous behavioral or physical issues, which is more appealing to the general public. Additionally, the people coming to buy and adopt the LOR horses have very different budgets than the Right Horse attendees. At the LOR Sale, horses are routinely sold for many thousands of dollars, whereas at the showcase, they are generally valued at less than two thousand dollars. People who attend the Sale typically have practical, work-related goals for their horses, such as daily ranch work or high-level horse showing, and in turn, are willing to pay more. In comparison, a lot of the rescue horses make great and safe mounts for children, therapy programs, non-riding or low-level riding homes. While a handful of them can go on to do other things, the general perception is that they cannot. The end goals for the rescue horses do not involve generating the type of income that LOR horses do, and so, they command lower prices.

After comparing these similar yet distinct programs at CSU, I concluded that it is simply not realistic to replicate the LOR efforts in other programs without a substantial amount of resources, time, and money, which are currently unavailable. Therefore, the best option for improving the results of events like Right Horse would be through effective advertising and marketing. What could attract the general public to a previously

unpopular event? What could captivate a new audience? What could have the most impact for the least amount of resource expenditure?

Dr. Nalin Chirakkara discusses several key elements that must be carefully considered before information about an event is announced to the public. The early evaluation of these elements influences how the event is presented and its overall potential for success. These elements can be broken down as follows: Competition, Weather, Cost, Entertainment, and Choosing the Right Media.

In surveying different types of horse events that compete with one another for audience, one must look at what makes the event *exceptional, distinctive, and superior to its rivals*'. In other words, what makes you stand out from the others? Several qualities distinguish the Right Horse Showcase from LOR. First, the rescue horses in Right Horse come from all kinds of backgrounds and are of varying ages. Some horses end up in rescue due to behavioral issues that have become dangerous, such as rearing, bucking, or bolting. Other horses have become exhausted from years of strenuous labor, such as cattle work or trail riding, and are subsequently no longer needed or desired by their owners. Some owners simply cannot pay for the expenses that build up as a horse ages and are unable to provide the necessary care for them. Other scenarios include horses being labeled as “untrainable” or “unrideable”, as well as horses that have suffered severe neglect, abuse, or a life-threatening injury. In contrast, the colts in LOR are known for being well-bred with good dispositions and conformation. Rehabbing an animal from neglect is a unique kind of *success story* that can be an emotionally appealing tactic when advertising adoptable horses. Training an unblemished colt does not require the same

depth of empathy and patience as does training a rescue. This difference could be highlighted in marketing materials.

Secondly, in similar rehabbing programs, the training of the horse is conducted by professionals rather than students. In Right Horse, by working under the supervision of experienced professionals, students gain valuable experiential learning opportunities that contribute to their future careers, and working with emotionally or physically damaged horses is particularly meaningful and rewarding. Bringing together the many diverse backgrounds of the students allows a range of perspectives to be considered that enrich the learning environment. Observing how students have worked through this process offers a singular appeal. This dynamic can be compared to the sport of basketball: while professionals display mastery, there is a special excitement and emotional resonance in watching learners develop and perform. When you root for an amateur, you are emotionally invested in their growth, effort, and transformation.

The weather factor is often the bane of horse competitions. No one wants to attend an event where they are shivering or sweating the entire time. As Chirakkara notes, “Outdoor performances or events may suffer if the weather is bad. When the weather gets bad, individuals may decide against engaging in outside leisure activities and instead choose to attend inside special events”. Happily, at the Colorado State University (CSU) Equine Center, the B.W. Pickett Arena is a well-lit and heated indoor arena that is comfortable for spectators all year round. Not only Right Horse, but all horse shows and competitions at CSU benefit from this advantageous environment.

In considering cost, there can be advantages and disadvantages to charging for an event, depending on the event's goals (e.g., revenue generation, attendance) and appeal

(e.g., prestige involved in paying a high ticket price). At events such as the Right Horse Showcase, because we are trying to attract as many people as possible, charging an entry fee for the event would not be in our favor. Chikkara says, “Fair, festival, and other special event ads often utilize the term 'free' since it grabs people's attention. If the price is competitive, it must be mentioned in the advertisement.” Phrases such as “Free entry!” or “Grounds admission included!” are easy ways to grab people’s attention.

The Right Horse Showcase can be viewed as a special kind of entertainment. In addition to targeting emotional appeal in one’s advertisement, one can also tug at audience members’ hearts during the event itself. There is enormous empathy and allyship developed in being able to watch horses learn new things and accomplish tasks they could not achieve before. Examples include walking across a teeter-totter bridge, getting on a trailer, or learning to jump. Engaging the audience to celebrate the students’ and horses’ successes as they conquer their fears is very exciting, whether you have never touched a horse in your life or have grown up with them.

There are many forms of media to choose from for the showcase, and the way an event is marketed determines the event’s success. Using a variety of media boosts attendance, and in equine events, a focus on utilizing photos and videos where the horse becomes a three-dimensional being that people can attach to is extremely effective. Social media is the most widely consumed form of media on a college campus; however, to attract the general public, newspapers and flyers can be more useful.

Extensive advertising often needs money and resources beyond an organization’s means. So on a smaller scale, Chikkara clearly noted that, “The use of color might attract more attention when print advertising is needed.” Minor aspects, such as playing with

many different color schemes, picking out colors from the photo itself, and choosing a vibrant photo, all attract people's attention without adding higher cost.

In addition to the elements Chirakkara discusses (Competition, Weather, Cost, Entertainment, and Choosing the Right Media), John Hall, Barry O'Mahony, and Julian Vieceli emphasized other aspects of event attendance affected by marketing and advertising. They conducted a study in Melbourne where they looked at sporting event attendance amongst four hundred and sixty respondents. They concluded that one's emotional response and the facility at which the event was held were the two main factors in predicting attendance outcomes. When designing promotional media, one needs to ask, "In what ways can I increase the emotional appeal of this event?" In addition to the above-mentioned factors around unique success stories and student growth, we want the horses depicted in marketing materials to look happy with ears perked forward in attention, and an appearance of enjoying their job. There should be no grimace on the horse's face from the bit, or tension throughout the horse's face or body. The rider should also look happy or content, not fearful or frustrated.

Other organizations have changed their advertising and marketing efforts with positive results, and from whom we can learn important lessons. One example is the American Wild Horse Conservation, which has faced significant challenges from the federal government and the Bureau of Land Management. A handful of their efforts have been seen as controversial, and many people have not agreed with their goals. However, with a substantial change in their advertising and marketing strategies, in the short time span of four years, more than four million dollars were raised, with about 85% of the funding coming from small-dollar donors. In 2024, the organization switched to a

digital-first approach through Facebook and Instagram ads. They found huge success in this approach. “The campaign earned an overwhelming 262% return on ad spend for AWHC,” (American Wild Horse Conservation). They also acquired thousands of new email contacts and raised significant funds through their efforts.

Closer to home, the CSU Polo Club has taken on direct marketing by utilizing chalking on the plaza. The plaza is a breezeway through which thousands of people walk every day. Many clubs and student organizations advertise in this space about upcoming events, encouraging people to join their clubs, and passing out flyers. Chalking the cement is an easy, timely, and cost-effective way to announce upcoming events. Without any face-to-face interaction, hundreds of people, either walking to class, headed to get lunch, or simply passing through, will read your message on the sidewalk without disrupting their daily routine. More people will be reached in this setting in comparison to social media because the folks who follow an Instagram account are self-selecting. Chalking on the plaza blankets everyone who passes the message, meaning new people are seeing your announcement for the first time, whether they are involved with horses or not. It is also important to consider multiple points of view in where people look. If they are looking down, listening to music, you may have more success writing something by their feet in comparison to hanging a flyer on a telephone pole. Through the club’s efforts of chalking the plaza to announce upcoming polo tournaments, we have seen a rise in involvement and attendance at home games, as well as had more involvement with students and faculty at tabling events.

By utilizing the lessons learned from research and from specific examples of organizations that changed their marketing approach, I am testing out the approach of the

design and distribution of a new promotional flyer and diversifying the strategies around different marketing channels for the Right Horse show. Throughout the design process, I kept in mind the overarching goal of presenting visually engaging content to encourage people to attend the event. I became interested in exploring how different layouts, colors, emotional appeals, and a call to action impact event attendance. I learned about audience engagement and design characteristics, as well as how to apply artistry through careful selection of the color scheme and layout. I found a balance between catching someone's attention and delivering a clear and concise message about the event.

When applying Chiakkara's element of 'Choosing the Right Media', I paid close attention to choosing a captivating photo for my flyer. I picked a photo with vibrant background colors that could easily be blurred in order to focus on the horse and rider. I chose a shade of green directly from the photo itself to bring a comprehensive and smooth appearance to my flyer. The color felt welcoming and cheerful. I also took into account the audience's emotional response that John Hall emphasized. I chose a photo where both the horse and rider looked happy. The rider was smiling, and the horse's ears were perked forward in attention. The horse was not showing any grimace on its face from the bit and was happily supporting its rider atop the pedestal. Finally, showcasing the horse performing a "trick" shows their potential, as this is not something the average horse can demonstrate.

Another idea is sharing the flyer on the television sets in the Animal Science building, as well as sharing it in the monthly/weekly emails sent out by the directors to all of the students in the department. By expanding where the information is distributed to multiple platforms and areas, it will reach a greater audience. This ties into Chirakkara's

idea of *Choosing the Right Media*. Additionally, sharing the flyer with the organizations from which the horses have been sourced would allow them to share it as well as to get the word out. This relates to Chirakkara's other element of *Entertainment*. Having another crowd of people who already feel empathetic towards the cause will, in turn, result in a larger audience of people at the showcase.

In addition to the research-inspired ideas I am incorporating, it is also important to consider the timing of publicity. For example, advertising the showcase right before finals week might be overwhelming to students who are going home for the holidays or stressed about their exams. By advertising many months in advance and sharing it multiple times throughout the year, there is a greater chance of having a larger turnout.

Another approach to bring more exposure to the adoptable horses would be to have a second opportunity to showcase the horses at one of the local rescues that have partnered with the program. By showcasing the horses at an event that is already well attended, there will be an audience of people who already support similar efforts and want to be involved.

In conclusion, there are many different approaches when it comes to marketing and advertising for any kind of sporting event. However, through my research, I have learned that the most valuable and successful ways to attract a larger audience to a smaller event are by adhering to people's emotions and by carefully considering extrinsic factors such as the cost, weather, and competitiveness. Throughout this semester, I designed an eye-catching flyer that was simply and clearly organized, included a carefully chosen color scheme, and created an overall aesthetically pleasing promotional product to support an organization I was eager to support.

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