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COMMUNICATING AN EFFECTIVE MESSAGE: UNDERSTANDING THE "WHY" OF YOUR ORGANIZATION

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Arts organizations no longer rely solely on traditional who/what/where/when messages to ensure participation, engagement and success. In today's environment, discovering, understanding, incorporating and communicating the deeper WHY of your organization throughout all its aspects is critical. Knowing who you are as an organization, your unique purpose, spirit, experience, and relevance to the community enables you to look beyond selling tickets for the concert, the exhibition, or the season to the broader, more universal and unique qualities that you have to offer. These are the qualities that do not change from performance to performance and are your true reason for being. The same qualities to which existing patrons, donors, subscribers, volunteers, and staff are drawn and become connected will also build and retain loyal patrons and donors, engage new audiences, and develop sustainable partnerships.

Creative and passionate people devote their careers and their lives to the arts and to those organizations that nurture and support them. Why? Some describe it as a sense of not having a choice, as they are compelled and driven to create, and they cannot imagine life without the arts. Some feel that a career working in the arts is more than a job, but is a cause serving others. They have experienced the power of a live performance or a work of art and have been inspired, moved, changed, challenged, soothed, or experienced a sense of belonging. These are powerful and compelling dynamics, and yet are often not expressed or conveyed by organizations – internally or externally.

Supplementing the "necessary" information in public relations, marketing and development materials with these universal organizational messages is crucial. Specific and consistent marketing and development tactics will build understanding, ownership, loyalty, and organizational focus while connecting with new audiences. Ultimately, this will increase earned and contributed income opportunities, so that the institution can grow and continue its community service. Developing an organizational approach to finding the "WHY's" in what we do, however, takes time and a deep internal look at the core of the institution.

START AT THE BEGINNING AND LOOK INTERNALLY

Begin the exploration process by reading your existing mission statement. The important process of confirming what it is that we do and want to do is best enhanced and deepened by then looking at why the organization does what it does. Then ask these questions: Why does this mission matter? Why does the organization matter to you, to the people you serve, to your community, and to the world? Is there a shared sense of identity? What is our "cause?" Is this apparent throughout daily operations, writing, and spontaneous testimonials of our internal and external stakeholders? The answers to the questions are there, often unspoken, but felt. Through a targeted process of inquiry, these core values can be articulated and become powerful and universal messages that resonate with stakeholders.

Next, read a series of your press releases, brochures, and other printed materials from the past year. Are the traditional details or facts supplemented with messages that convey and address the "why" above? Generally, annual fund letters come the closest to verbalizing the Why with compelling information on who the organization's outreach programs benefit. Additionally, membership brochures can be effective in conveying a sense of belonging that permeates the organizational culture.

START SMALL AND STAY PERSONAL

In identifying what is important to the institution, it is critical to interview as many different constituents as possible. Remember that you're looking for personal information that they may or may not have ever articulated before. There are no right or wrong answers! A few key internal and external stakeholders that should be on this list include:

- Artistic director
- Board members
- Staff
- Donors, both large and small
- Volunteers
- Subscribers
- Single Ticket buyers
- Existing partners and collaborators
- Existing sponsors
- Guest artists

Although a large-scale questionnaire or survey may seem more analytical, it's not solely the data that is required. Rather, performing this personal relationship building, will allow you to gain a deeper understanding of the connections (emotional, social, economic) to the art, artists, and organization. There is value simply in the process, and therefore information gathering is best done in one-on-one conversations. Ask people questions as if you know nothing about your organization. Specific and personal responses are very important, so you might try using the "2-year old child approach" by asking "why" "Why" WHY?" You will then experience the true feelings first-hand and hopefully gain a better sense of which messages are important to communicate to others.

The discovery process can be conducted formally by the senior staff or outside consultants, or simply by informally incorporating questions into daily meetings, social settings, conversations, and ticket sales transactions with patrons. Thinking about and articulating their answers to various questions will strengthen each person's awareness about how they feel. They will often repeat their newfound focus and cause to someone else! This process will also reveal a host of interesting stories that will make compelling content in brochures, press releases, and newsletters. It will also reinforce the value of your organization to existing funders and collaborators, while revealing new opportunities to sustain funding.

QUESTIONS TO DISCOVER YOUR "WHY"

Below are questions that you should include, formally or informally, in determining the core values of your organization, as well as tactics for publicizing and marketing specific events. Some information you may already know. It will be important to look at the data in its totality, however, to get a full understanding of the reason that your organization is so important to your stakeholders. These questions can include:

Organizational Identity and Development:

- How long have you been involved in the organization?
- What first attracted you to it?
- Why do you continue to be involved?
- What do you "get" out of your role or participation?
- Do you feel the organization is unique from any others? In what ways?
- What role does the organization serve, and what impact does the organization have in the community, region, world?
- Why are or were you excited about a particular exhibition, concert, artist, or piece?
- What did you enjoy about your experience? What were you thinking or feeling? Was it an active or passive experience for you? Did you feel connected?
- Did you see people you knew? Is this important to you?
- For Board and staff, add one more: Does the organization have its own identity separate from its current Artistic Director? How would you describe it?

Season or Event Marketing and Public Relations:

For the Artistic Director, Curator, Artist:

- Why was a particular work selected? Why is the particular work meaningful? Why are you interested in this piece or project?
- Is there historical or personal significance? Why is it important to our mission?
- Is performing/exhibiting in our city or with our organization different than other places? How?
- What are you most looking forward to regarding this endeavor?
- What will be involved in bringing this project to the community?
- How do you plan to effectively engage the audience?

OBSERVE AND SYNTHESIZE THE INFORMATION

As you go through this process, do themes appear? Do they resonate with your mission? Do they resonate with you? Your organization may be many things to many people, and when you know and can communicate some of those core reasons to the community, your messages will be heard! Chances are also good that the same characteristics that have been described by the people you interviewed will be valued and appreciated by others. The goal is to both reinforce your core constituents' support – those who may already understand why supporting the arts and your organization are important, but can become even more focused – and to find a connection to new donors and audience members. Not through slick or superficial marketing, but through content, context, and connection.

In pulling together your results, there are several additional steps that will help you. First, simply develop a variety of bullet points with the different answers people gave to your questions. All have value and may be useful in different ways. Next, based upon your interviews and the information above, describe your organization. Don't necessarily repeat the language of your mission statement – keep it real, personal, connected. What are the "sound bites?" Then think more about what people are currently saying about your organization. What do you want others to say (based on truth)? What do you want to be written about you? Finally, develop a list of messages that can then be consistently and repeatedly communicated throughout your organization, in conversations, marketing materials, development materials, the press, board meetings, and in staff gatherings.

COMMUNICATE YOUR IDENTITY AND TELL YOUR STORIES

Finally, look for new opportunities to incorporate and communicate your core value information, the why messages, into your daily problem solving both internally and externally. In some cases the Why will be subtle or just a sub-point in collateral materials or press releases. In other cases, it will be your headline. And sometimes, the Why, your "cause," will simply keep staff and board morale up, internal motivation high, and a central focus on your overarching purpose.

Anticipate the questions and needs of those with whom you want to reach. "Why should I go to this concert?" "Why should my newspaper print an advance article?" "Why should I volunteer, donate, or buy a ticket?" "Why should my business support this cause?" "Why does my work matter?" If the organizations that are stewards for the arts don't pose and answer these questions for others, how can we possibly expect others to understand? We're not selling widgets, and we're not solely in the business of selling tickets. We are in the business of inspiring, educating, and creating meaningful experiences that contribute to the quality of life of a community and more! What we do matters. Why?

Public Relations: Be active. Take a leadership role in explaining why your event matters to the community as a whole. Your artistic administrator, chief curator or music director are key sources of information. Go beyond the press release announcing the "World's greatest artist, performs the world's greatest piece, for a great ticket price." For each event, communicate the rich and multi-layered "angles" related to artistic quality or a one-time-only experience. Go behind-the-scenes (educate!) – what does it take to do what is being done? Supplement your "arts" coverage in the media, with "human interest" coverage. Who is the artist as a person? Support your why statements with testimonials gained through your interviews.

Help tell the stories of the people in your organization, including the volunteers, the staff, the artists, and all the people that inspire and are inspired. Stay true to your mission, your event and your audience, but reach out to communicate a broader context, build a feeling of connection prior to the event, and convey the feelings, emotions and experiences participants have shared with you.

Marketing: The amount of (free) visibility that can be generated through the Public Relations tactics described above cannot be overstated. To provide strategic focus to what is being said externally, however, and to ensure that your marketing dollars are used wisely and effectively, craft messages that are strong, focused and consistent. Incorporate some of the Why's you've identified for the particular events being marketed. In addition, be sure to clearly communicate your unique organizational identity - regardless of a particular exhibition or concert. Say who you are, and why what you do matters, and what the community will gain by participating.

Development: Individuals are constantly re-evaluating their giving. Help donors understand who you are as an organization, what unique role you play in the community, and why their support makes a difference. Clearly communicate your "cause" and the need beyond simply "we need more." Knowing who you are as an organization also enables a higher success rate in finding partners who either share one or more of your "Why's" or who can benefit by something you have to offer. Applying the process of discovery with corporate sponsors can create successful and sustainable sponsorships based upon each organization's Why, a clear benefit to your "cause," and defined deliverables; all providing tangible value to both partners.

Professional Staff: Many arts organizations attract professional staff who, during the hiring process, express their personal interest in the particular art form the organization represents. When all is well, the team experiences periods of high-energy and has a "do whatever it takes" approach. Often staff most closely in contact with the creative personnel, or with access to the organization's "big picture," are better equipped to sustain their level of engagement. They can see the future and overall impact. In other parts of the organization, however, issues of staff burnout and turnover may exist. From your Why interviews, you will better understand an employee's motivation, and they will better understand your organizational "cause." As there are many individuals working on behalf of your organization, there are just as many "Why's" themes that resonate with the group. These can become powerful messages to rally around.

CONCLUSION

Non-profit 501(c)3 arts organizations exist for a variety of reasons. Communicating those reasons to the community is critical to survival and to an organization's ability to educate, inspire, affect quality of life, and to make a real and lasting difference. In challenging economic times, the focus understandably turns to selling tickets and increasing or sustaining contributed income. Applying old tactics in today's environment of world events, however, often feels "less meaningful" or "empty." It is now doubly important to attract audiences who are looking for deeper connections.

The arts are the perfect vehicle for community engagement! Now is the time to look inward, reexamine your organization's purpose, understand the role(s) it plays in the community, and create meaningful ways to communicate WHY your organization is a vibrant, integral, and essential part of your community. You'll still be selling tickets and asking for donations, but you will also be building relationships that go deeper than a single event, or a single donation – developing a group of people that share the organization's "cause" with a sense of energized connection, purpose, ownership and pride.

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**FOR MORE INFORMATION ON HOW ARTS CONSULTING GROUP CAN HELP YOUR ORGANIZATION
IDENTIFY STRATEGIES TO BUILD INSTITUTIONAL IDENTITY,
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