

Making Culture Matter – Funding Panel

At first I was a little puzzled about the connection between the symposium theme (which I love) of Making Culture Matter and the subtopic of Funding (private and public sector) which I was asked to address. As the overall topic, specifically of Helping Museums to Matter within their communities, has long been my professional mission, and one that I hope to further in my relatively recent role as a provincial government funder, I have tried to reconcile the two in my thinking here.

From this perspective I will base my contribution to this panel presentation on the premise that any cultural organization needs to be clear and focussed in its understanding of several organizational issues before seeking funding from any source whether public or private sector:

Your mission/statement of purpose

In my role of reviewing applications for funding support from museums, galleries and archives, I have been struck by how many of these organizations have mission statements or statements of purpose that do not actually state their purpose, instead they limit themselves to describing what their staff do and on what topic. If cultural workers, including boards, cannot clearly articulate their purpose i.e. why they matter to their community or their audiences, then it makes it difficult to guide actions, activities and decision-making.

It makes it hard to identify relevant partnerships and collaborations. It makes it hard to decide what government or foundation funding program will help them to achieve what they want to achieve for their communities. And then it makes it even harder to convince those funders (more on that in a moment) why supporting the project will produce the results they are looking for.

Almost 12 years ago, the late great museum thinker, Stephen Weil said, in his classic presentation “Beyond Management: Making Museums Matter” *“All too frequently, those called upon to make judgements about museums – not only funders (and think about this point, funders are called upon to make judgements about your*

cultural organization) *donors, critics and others outside the field, but sometimes those actually within the field as well - have failed to concentrate on what ultimately matters – ends and focussed their attentions instead on the means*". His examples of this misplaced thinking:

- We are large and have a big budget so we must be worthy
- We were founded and operate (collect, conserve...) for the good of everyone so we must be worthy
- Our programming is really well done so we must be worthy
- We are well managed so we must be worthy
- We have been around for fifty years so we deserve to exist

Think for a moment about the difference between a mission statement that says: "The _____ Museum & Archives will collect, preserve, research, exhibit and educate on the subject of _____ County from early settlement to the First World War." Mission statements such as this, not only do not answer the question "so what?" or complete the statement "...in order to... They also are unable to inspire or convey passion for the activity they describe. If such a mission can't even inspire the people who are doing the work or looking for the money to do the work, why should a funder be inspired to support it?

Then compare it with this one: "The mission of the _____ Aquarium is to inspire conservation of the oceans."

Which one matters...to you? To your community? To our world? If you could only support a project that furthered the mission of one of those two institutions which would you pick as the funder whose money comes from tax dollars?

Organizational Strategic plan

Strategic plans identify how your organization plans, for the next year, three years or even five years, to make their activities further their mission statement. It might include internally focussed activities such as strengthening the board, improving membership records and communications, fundraising, but each activity within the plan is there because it will, in some way, improve the ability of the organization to

achieve its purpose and that purpose is externally focussed i.e. mattering to, contributing to the community it is there to serve.

When seeking funding is identified in a strategic plan, which, in our sector, it almost always is, whether it be through fundraising or grants or sponsorships...the “so what” of that monetary goal needs to be strategic i.e. not just to “keep the doors open” but articulating to keep the doors open so that...what will make a difference and therefore matter to the community, however you define your community

I’m sure all of us here, whether you live or work in metropolitan Toronto, have been following the budget cutting proposals and public statements from City officials on culture with dismay, concern, anger and amazement. Two recent newspaper articles caught my eye that are relevant here

- Last Tuesday a Toronto city councillor was quoted in the Toronto Star as saying “*Now the library is becoming the community centre. Is the library to be a community centre? If we don’t have the discussion, we’ll never make ends meet*” Now I haven’t been on a community library board, but I am betting that is exactly what the board and staff want the library to be. I have always encouraged museums to use community libraries as models of the way libraries meet the needs of the communities they serve. Go figure!
- The other article focused on a dedicated Centennial student who also works for one of the four Toronto museums that was recommended by the budget team for closure. She is praised by the museum’s supporters for coming up with new ways to make money for the operation of the museum, activities that will raise revenue “in the tradition of the building’s history of food and hospitality”. For me the concern is that it is fundraising focussed on delivering the same result, replacing one source of revenue with another without getting at the real issue: What is the mission of this museum? How does or could that “tradition of food and hospitality” matter to its community beyond the volunteers and staff who want to keep it going as is? How can they use the one year reprieve to identify how their existence and operation can matter or make a difference to their community? Their “strategic plan” seems to be to find revenue

sources to let them continue to do what they do “internally” whether it matters to anyone else or not.

So now, you know what your purpose is, you know what you want to accomplish over the next few years and you have identified a marketing campaign or potential foundations or other funding sources, that can raise the money to make this happen. Now before you apply your next requirements are:

Organizational objectives (SMART) for whatever you want the funded project to accomplish (both internal and external) These are the tools that will inspire the people (you) who have to find the money and deliver the product and convince the people with the money that they want this too.

I won't spend any more time on this key point except a brief comment about objectives, I see a lot of grant applications whose objectives are either not “SMART”:

Specific – what they want to achieve

Measurable – you can measure whether you have achieved it or not

Achievable – is your organization able to deliver this within the time identified?

Realistic – your organization can do this with the resources (\$, time and people) available

Time bound – we will achieve the result within this specific time frame

Or not inspiring: objectives never start with the word “Hopefully”

Community and/or partner involvement (buy-in) with project before applying for funding

Your organization should already be involving the community and therefore have evidence of their support as part of the “funding” to demonstrate that culture “matters” to the audiences the organization wishes to serve. I was recently contacted by an Ontario Trillium Foundation officer about an application they had from an organization that was seeking significant funding for a new building that they said would enable them to work with various cultural communities in their city and provide programs and exhibits that would engage them. The program officer saw no evidence that they were currently engaging

with any of these communities, no letters of support...he kindly called us to find out if we were familiar with the organization through our funding programming and therefore were aware of anything they were doing that would demonstrate that they were engaged with any of these communities. We had to confess we were not. This meant their funding request was turned down because they had clearly failed to:

familiarize yourself with the priorities (government speak) and objectives of the program, foundation ...

you are approaching for funding support and ensure that there is a **match** between their priorities and your project objectives (which support your strategic plan which supports your mission)

This has two benefits:

- if your application is successful, your organization or project doesn't drift away from its own priorities in the search for funding and therefore has the resources, including human resources, to accomplish this project without sacrificing core mandate, we call this "Mission creep", instead of supporting it
- it is clear to the funding decision makers (and this was the problem above) for Trillium, that what they want to accomplish and what you are going to deliver are in alignment

In relationship to both these points, I am often contacted by institutions who successfully received a Museums & Technology Fund grant, who are not going to be able to meet the deadlines for the project they had set for themselves for any number of reasons (see SMART objectives). The options that we discuss are either:

1. return the government portion money
2. identify when they can accomplish their objectives successfully and negotiate a realistic adjustment to the deadline

The government does not want the money back, they want the successful achievement of the project's objectives (and deliverables) because those meet the objectives of their program – governments want to tell their taxpayers what great things their money has made possible (in our case) "for Ontarians"

So, how does funding contribute to making culture matter? It doesn't, not unless what your organization is doing matters and you know how it matters, and not just to you.

[This following was not delivered at the symposium due to lack of time:]

Finally, I want to briefly share some thoughts that are not my own, from a recent (2010) sectoral report out of the UK "[Sharper Investment for Changing Times: Getting More Out of Museums, Libraries and Archives](#)" (Museums, Libraries, Archives Council). I think you will feel some optimism that this government organization sees value in tax-based support of these organizations and feel they do matter and can matter even more with strategic support and a new way of thinking about how these organizations deliver service, even in tough economic times. Whether elected officials in Britain are behind the statements here is, I think, yet to be determined.

The Museums, Libraries, Archives Council believes these organizations matter, or many of them do, because they have a role to play in:

- Improving the economy
- Increasing social mobility
- Making places better
- Supporting learning
- Connecting communities

The report goes on to identify how government (funding) can get more out of museums, libraries and archives by:

- Distribution of services
- New governance and delivery models
- New funding models
- Making investment more strategic
- Performance and efficiency
- Delivering services with, and for, diverse communities
- Creating the workforce that can deliver the change
- Working across local boundaries
- Re-positioning the service and,

- Reaching out to new audiences

I apologize for the long quote here that summarizes their point on the optimum relationship between government funders and the organizations funded:

“This prospectus proposes ambitious but realistic solutions, based on long-term partnership between local government, central government, and museums, libraries and archives themselves, each responsible for their side of a bargain where:

- *Museums, libraries and archives work to make a wider public impact as efficiently as possible, concentrating less on sustaining costly buildings and storing unseen objects, and more on opening up fantastic collections of books, records and iconic artefacts for learning and enjoyment*
- *Local government utilise the value of museum, library and archive services for wider purposes, innovating and integrating with other services, working across boundaries, and working with public and private partners, and*
- *National government ensure the longer term funding and statutory framework in which councils, museums, libraries and archives can have the freedom, flexibility and stability to plan for far reaching change.*

The ambition is that the public – user, visitor, consumer and tourist – are in charge; able to enjoy and learn from quality collections, seamless services, and personalised help and information, whether in welcoming buildings or online.

I have brought a few other great recent studies and resources that provide case studies of arts and heritage organizations that are creating opportunities for active participation that I am sure will come up in our discussions later today as we move on to audience development.