

Engaging “Not the Usual Suspects” ...

Maryo Ewell reviewed research done by the RAND Corporation about arts participation. The principles are valid for any nonprofit, not just the arts. Her handout, p. 1, summarizes the key points of the research.

The gist is: Think about 3 “types” of people.

- Your old loyal friends love your mission, and a good way to keep them engaged is by providing enriching experiences to them – perhaps behind-the-scenes look at some element of what you do, or participating in shaping a new endeavor, or having a chance for intimate conversation with a key figure.
- Then there are those who would participate, but there are concrete things preventing them: they need child care, the time of day is wrong, the marketing isn’t reaching them. You identify these barriers, and decide whether you can eliminate them.
- Finally, there are those who don’t think that your organization is for people like them. This last has to do with changing perceptions and attitudes, and building relationships.

Building relationships take a very long time, involving things like regularly starting to attend “their” events and understanding where “they” are coming from.

Maryo told a story about this: *John Malpede is the founder of a well-known theater company in Los Angeles – the LAPD – Los Angeles Poverty Department. It’s a company of homeless people who write and perform their own shows. He was asked how it got started. Here’s his story: “I used to manage a theater company with a nice building right next door to a homeless shelter. We were eager to have our neighbors attend and always gave blocks of tickets to the shelter. No one ever used the tickets. One night, I was locked out, and had to go next door to call a locksmith. I was chatting with some of the men, and asked them why they never came to our shows. One fellow said to me: John, are you comfortable here at this facility? I had to admit that I was not. He said to me: Well, if you are not comfortable in my house, what makes you think I would be comfortable in yours?”*

Mary told a story that was similar: *Dave Wiens of Gunnison was starting the Gunnison Trails organization. He could never get ranchers to participate in the planning of the organization or its projects. Then he realized that these folks always had a table at the Ol’ Miner Restaurant at a certain time each week where they informally came, had coffee, chatted. He began attending. It took almost 9 months before they really included him in the conversation, but it laid the groundwork for building a relationship of trust that led to several of the ranchers getting involved in the Trails organization.*

Mary offered 5 key strategy areas for engaging the “disinclined”:

- The approach must be two-way – visiting “them” as much as you want them to visit you – being open to what they offer to you as much as what you hope to offer to them
- Who makes the invitation matters – a good argument for working with a partner whom “they” trust, so that the invitation to participate comes from your partner
- Support your supporters – if businesses or individuals are assisting you, make sure that you use their services, and get your board to do the same
- It’s all about relationship- and trust-building.
- “Map” the groups you are interested in: who are its spokespeople? Who can help connect you to them/introduce you? Who can help you understand their needs and constraints and concerns, and perhaps help you devise ways to address these?

Finally: beware the word “Outreach!” This was John Malpede’s strategy in simply offering free tickets and assuming that “they” would come. It tends to suggest a one-way approach (this is “for” you) rather than a relationship of mutuality (“we’re doing this together.”). The mantra – “With, Not For” – is also one increasingly valued by funders, by the way.

A new word was coined today – WITHREACH. Let’s try to use it every time we’re tempted to say “outreach”!