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Introduction to Community Engagement

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What if I told you I had a magic formula that would absolutely guarantee you would live to be 100 years old and never get sick - not so much as a cold. Sound good?

What if I then told you the only down side of the formula is that it stops working if you spend any time at all with another human being. You could have 100 worry-free years, but you could not so much as stop to say hello to another soul.

While some rare folks might think that tradeoff is worth it, it would probably take most of us less than a second to declare that a life free of other people would not be a life worth living for even 1 year, let alone 100 years. We realize instinctively that what might be good for sustaining us as individual physical beings - keeping us alive and strong - would end up being a death sentence, rather than a prescription for life.

Unfortunately, that is exactly what happens when our community organizations, who could accomplish incredible things if they all worked together, instead use tools that encourage them to compete. It is hard to build trust with another organization when we are simultaneously working to "beat them out for funding." We know instinctively that we could accomplish so much more together than we can separately, but so many of the systems in the Community Benefit Sector encourage us to compete with one another for the seemingly scarce resources our organizations need to survive.

Because our mission at the Community-Driven Institute is to help Community Benefit organizations to create significantly more impact in our communities, we have spent a lot of time exploring the issue of competition. Here is what we have found:

-  Competition precludes our building trust and linking arms with the very people who care most about what we care about.
-  The business tools we have been encouraged to use are built around competition, as competition is a basic assumption of the for-profit business world.
-  One of the tools that particularly emphasizes competition is Marketing, as a large part of its aim is to show how you are better than your competition, to ensure your organization's survival.
-  It is therefore clear that, due to its basic assumptions regarding competition, Marketing as it is practiced in the business sector, and as it has been translated into the Community Benefit sector, is a tool that goes counter to the needs of Community Benefit Organizations.

This logic leads to one conclusion:

If we can find an alternative tool that accomplishes what is good about Marketing (publicity, visibility, emphasis on what we are doing well), while encouraging connection and cooperation rather than competition, we should use that tool instead!

There is such a tool. It is called Community Engagement. Unlike Marketing, Community Engagement encourages building trust and linking arms, while raising awareness and visibility. The more you begin using Community Engagement strategies, the more you will realize that this approach can accomplish far more benefit for the work you care about than Marketing has ever accomplished.

For more information about how competition precludes our ability to create significant community impact [\(CLICK HERE\)](#)

For more information about how to raise money and other resources without focusing on competition [\(CLICK HERE\)](#)

Marketing vs. Community Engagement

Marketing is a tool that originated in the business world, and has been adapted for use in the Community Benefit sector. The following is the definition of Marketing from the American Marketing Association:

"Marketing is the process of planning and executing the conception, pricing, promotion and distribution of ideas, goods and services to create exchanges that satisfy individual and organizational goals."

While the definition from the AMA talks about creating "exchanges," the actual process of Marketing is, in fact, a one-way effort. The "exchanges" are not part of the marketing; the exchanges are the goal - a purchase. The marketing process itself (from advertising to public relations and everything in between) is most typically the art of telling, with the goal of selling.

Community engagement is different from marketing in one key way - the whole process is an exchange. Here is a definition we have used for Community Engagement:

Community Engagement is the process of building relationships with community members who will work side-by-side with you as an ongoing partner, in any and every way imaginable, building an army of support for your mission, with the end goal of making the community a better place to live.

Community Engagement is about connecting in a real way. When we interact with as many different people as possible, and with as many different portions of the community as possible, it does not take long to see that we all want the same thing - for our communities to be incredible places to live. Once that happens, and once you find ways to deeply engage community members in the work your organization is doing, then you will find your organization's short term needs begin to fall into place almost on their own - money, volunteers, board members, legislative support, etc.

That is when the following becomes clear:

While community engagement will accomplish any and all of those smaller sub-goals, the larger goal of engaging the community is **an engaged community** - the antidote to the apathy we all hear so much about.

Community Engagement Activities

Community Engagement activities are different from Marketing activities in many ways. We have mentioned that the act of engagement is an act of relationship building - that is one difference. Another difference is that these activities are interactive - there is no passive absorbing of information in the act of "engagement." A brochure, a billboard, an ad in a program - these are not engaging activities.

So what does one do in "Community Engagement?"

We connect. We interact. We build relationships between the individuals in our communities and the cause we care about.

This work can be done in group activities, where individuals within your organization mingle and engage the individuals present. Or it could be done one-on-one, over breakfast. The whole reason we wrote "FriendRaising" is to show that there are dozens and dozens of activities that can work to engage your community directly with the work your organization does - and further that those activities are easy to do, comfortable for all involved, and most can be done at very little (if any) cost.

And that is the incredible thing about Community Engagement activities - they are MORE fun, LESS costly, and MORE effective for the work of Community Benefit organizations! Why? Because Community Engagement activities are interactive - they are not about "telling and selling" but about real, honest sharing of your goals and dreams for the community - creating real, honest connection.

A True Story

A small counseling center in upstate New York had been struggling financially for some time. Despite their financial woes, the board was hesitant to fundraise (as many boards are). Tension was building.

Then, under the leadership of an insightful board president, the board decided to change its focus. Instead of focusing on money, they instead focused on building support for the mission - telling their story, asking people for their thoughts, their ideas - engaging community members in a true exchange.

After just 6 months, here is what their board president told us:

"Our money problems disappeared when we stopped worrying about money. We have been able to raise support in ways the board never imagined. Board members feel comfortable doing the work, and it is unbelievable how quickly it all just fell into place."

Creating a Community Engagement Plan

Just as you would create a Marketing Plan based on your organization's goals, your organization should have an ongoing Community Engagement Plan, based on those same goals.

The steps in creating a Community Engagement Plan are simple. Much like other planning processes, they will include identifying goals, and then breaking down who you need to engage, and how you will engage them. The key is to realize you are engaging in a real relationship - one that can accomplish the goals at hand, while engaging that person's caring and wisdom. From there, the sky is the limit as to what you can accomplish together!

As you begin your planning work, you will begin to realize something incredible: Because Community Engagement is an asset-based activity, you already have everything you need to get started - your staff, your volunteers, your current supporters, your board. There is no wishing involved in community engagement - you really do have everything you need.

For a step-by-step guide to Community Engagement Planning,
[Click Here](#)

Engaging Other Organizations

One point worth mentioning, as you determine who to talk with:

For any of your goals that aim at directly impacting the community - whether that goal is to build a new program, or attack a new community issue, etc. - add to your "list of people to engage" the folks at similar organizations in town, who care about the same things as you.

The individuals working and volunteering at those organizations are likely thinking about the very issues you are trying to address, and you will be able to accomplish so much more together than alone. So while you are out there contacting users of your service or patrons of your theater; funders and donors; city council members and regular citizens, start engaging your "competition" in that work as well. (And as you have those conversations, don't forget to talk not only with EDs and board members, but program managers, case workers - the folks who have hands-on experience with what is and is not working!)

While you may be nervous the first time you have one of these conversations, you will soon learn the secret to community engagement - conversations with people who care about what you care about are the most energizing conversations you can have.

The End Result

If we were doing Marketing, what end result could we expect? After differentiating ourselves from our competition, positioning ourselves as the go-to source, and trying to get into the minds of our "target audience" to craft the appropriate way to tell our story, we could expect that we would achieve whatever end goal we have defined up front. If we were marketing an event, the end result would be attendance at the event. If we were marketing to raise money, the end result of dollars would likely be achieved. We all know from experience that Marketing does what it is supposed to do - it gets attention for the thing you wanted attention for.

With Community Engagement, though, you will find that the end result is - well - everything! An engaged community will not only attend an event, but they will also volunteer, and write letters to their legislators; they will help you make your programs more effective, and yes, they may even send additional checks throughout the year.

The list of benefits of engaging your community in the mission you care about is long indeed. More important than even all those results, though, Community Engagement builds community, just by the simple act of engaging. And that engaged community, working together arm-in-arm, can move mountains in building an amazing place to live.


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