

EXECUTIVE DIRECTORS NETWORK

Report on Chris Bruhl Talk Building Bridges to Business

December 5, 2013
Westport Country Playhouse

There were 21 members of the Executive Directors Network (and three CAFC staffmembers) in attendance at the “Building Bridges to Business” session with Chris Bruhl at the Westport Country Playhouse on Dec 5th.

1. Introduction: Business Council of Fairfield County

Chris Bruhl is President and CEO of the Business Council of Fairfield County (BCFC) but he was quick to point out that 40% of his career had been spent in the arts (as ED of the Westchester Arts Council for 10 years, among other positions), so he is well positioned to be an effective bridge builder between the arts and business.

He pointed out that BCFC had its roots in the Stamford Board of Trade, founded in 1890, which had evolved into a structure found in only eight other organizations in the country: a leadership network of both small and large businesses, including Chambers of Commerce (BCFC includes 16 Chambers around Fairfield County).

With no county government, there’s no central governmental source for Fairfield County data. In response, the business community created its own and, since 1990, the Fairfield County Information Exchange, run by Lisa Mercurio, has been a part of the BCFC and is *the* place to go for data about the County.

2. Context

Context is everything when considering the relationship between culture and business. Bruhl pointed out that Fairfield County today, by many measures, is more Greater Metropolitan New York than it is New England. What are the implications of this?

One implication is that our core set of values is less New England and more global, through our identification with New York City as a major global financial and cultural center. A quick survey of the room produced just one person who was born in CT. The facts, said Chris, were that 1 in 5 living in the County were born outside CT (75% of those with college degrees).

In reality, our values *are* global. Looking at Stamford and Greenwich, for example, those residents with degrees tended to be foreign-born, and that is important for our culture: in terms of the teams people root for, and how they define theatre, for example. Most are here to build their career, and have high aspirations. So the culture tends to be complex and metropolitan.

Our mission, then, is to build a sense of authenticity and help this community feel *at home*.

Bruhl emphasized that in business today *anomie* is an issue - with many employees under constant pressure to reduce costs and eliminate jobs. He said there were many powerful corporate executives who assume that their narrative is everyone's narrative. It's our job to make sure there are more narratives: to celebrate, interpret and translate cultures.

In this world, contributions are made because business wants something done. And here, Bruhl started his theme of engagement: working with business to give business what it needs to do its job in the community. Understanding what really matters to a community is key.

Assumptions, he said, are deadly: you have to find out through conversation and engagement what a company wants. As an aside, he commented that for all the work on making in-depth economic impact studies, it was the public sector (cities, towns and states), not corporations, that were interested in such studies. GE cares little about cultural policy.

3. Inflection Points

Mr. Bruhl continued by discussing what he called the key inflection points, those moments or issues that indicate momentous change, in the arena of culture and economics. He enumerated seven:

- a. Demographics: the impact on our cultural and philanthropic traditions of changes in our demographic make-up;
- b. Tradition: as Fairfield County is older than the nation, there are issues of tradition versus the new;
- c. Healthcare: with rising immigration and an increasing birthrate, healthcare is the most dynamically growing economic activity: currently 20% of US GDP, it's moving towards 40% and hospitals are going to be an important part of what we do;
- d. Contingent Workforce (temporary workers): currently 25% of the workforce in California, temporary workers are going to be an increasingly larger proportion of the workforce across the nation, with implications for our sense of place and the meaning of "home";
- e. Disruptive Digital Technologies: transforming how companies and universities do business, digital technology helps collaboration and communication and has dramatically affected employment patterns (none of the 28,000 Stamford unemployed are candidates for the 900 digital-technology job openings);
- f. Sustainability: in these disruptive economic times, issues of sustainability are increasingly ever-present;

- g. The Equity Debate: as President Obama takes on income disparity as an issue, it's important to remember that CT has both the greatest achievement gap and income gap in the nation, and this issue should be present in our own programs.

4. Local Data

Bruhl continued by sketching a profile of our corporate community. Stamford is the HQ of local corporate culture: many CEOs came here because of lower costs and the tax advantages of CT. Corporations also came because of the high proportion of educated women who work out of the home (30% in the 1960s; now rapidly approaching 60%). With many women aged 25-50 in the corporate executive pipeline, and the majority of new businesses created by women, white male leadership is beginning to recede. There's also a shift in the suburban paradigm (see Allison Arieff's October 2, 2011 *New York Times* article, "Shifting the Suburban Paradigm,") that is seeing more employees flocking to smaller towns and their cultural life.

Another shifting paradigm is corporate community leadership. The corporate leadership is no longer engaged in community leadership - they are too busy. However, individual employees *can* be engaged in leadership.

5. Understanding Businesses and Their Interest in Working With Us

Bruhl turned to an abbreviated version of the *The BCA National Survey of Business Support for the Arts, 2013*, that had been distributed to the Network earlier to briefly review its key points about corporate donations to the arts and cultural community. (See online version at http://issuu.com/americans4arts/docs/bca_20survey_20double_20spread?e=0/3778303)

Issues he wanted to underline included:

- Understanding the environment in which businesses work and how to make it work for us.
- Smaller companies overall give more frequently, but in smaller amounts (typically \$1000).
- *Talent* is one of the highest priorities for businesses: they go where the talent is and talented people will not live in communities with thin culture.
- "*Quality of Life*" is code for "Can I get good people?"
- Social issues are important as companies can't afford to blow off talent and are aware of the critical need to improve education.
- Quality of the Worker: more arts and culture can add to the quality of employees.

6. Practical Implications: What we need to do.

Most businesses don't give because they're not asked, and most contributions come from small businesses. Bruhl gave us a few pointers as to what to do about this:

- If we want to convert businesses to be our supporters, we need a relevant message.
- Starting with our current audience/supporters and their employers and family: elevate their levels of support and treat them as our *implicit* ambassadors. By having them talk up our organizations and activities in their networks, we exert peer influence and demonstrate a norm.

- If we want to engage businesses, we need to go where business goes and participate in their meetings: become a member of the local Chamber of Commerce, get involved in their leadership programs, participate fully to advance *their* agendas.

Bruhl then drilled down to give an example of what becoming involved with a local chamber could involve.

- Budget for participation (say \$1,000/yr), include a board member as well as yourself, and attend every month.
- Join teams, for example those working on education, livability, downtown safety, downtown promotion issues and become a worker and leader on the teams.
- Within a year: volunteer to chair a sub-group.
- Then recruit colleagues and prospects to join and work on the issues.

Bruhl suggested we should think increasingly about yield, or outcome, rather than effort.

Final Words.

- People give because they're asked and are persuaded by people they like and trust.
- We are the permanent leaders of our community that build the community
- You are the people they need and let them learn and know that.

In discussion, when asked about the issue of engaging young people, Bruhl replied that the business community was far ahead of the cultural community in engaging younger people and advised that we get involved with young professional groups. In fact, he thought the more we embrace the business community, the younger our audiences would become.

Next Steps

In thanking Chris Bruhl for his inspiring address with its many practical suggestions, Ryan Odinak outlined what our next steps might be. The EDN Steering Committee had suggested the creation of affinity groups that might meet in between our main plenary gatherings. It had been suggested that this be initially organized by geography, and we had decided to pursue this option.

The Cultural Alliance would be working with its EDN Steering Committee to gather proposals and suggestions for regional meetings to take place in March/April (possibly in Bridgeport, Norwalk, Stamford and/or Greenwich) in which executive directors of Cultural Alliance member organizations would meet to share their own experiences with businesses and to chart new practices based on some of Chris Bruhl's suggestions. Local Chambers of Commerce might be included in some of these meetings.

We look forward to discussing these ideas with you, and invite your own suggestions and offers for assistance.

Ryan Odinak
David Green