

## **EXECUTIVE DIRECTORS NETWORK**

### **Summary Report on Three Regional Meetings - March 2014**

#### **“Building Bridges to Business”**

##### **Introduction**

Following up on Chris Bruhl’s very well-received December 2013 talk to the network on engaging with business, members of the EDN met in three regional meetings to discuss some of the implications of Chris’ talk. Overall, 30 participants met in Fairfield (Bellarmine Museum, March 13), Greenwich (Greenwich Historical Society, March 20), and Norwalk (Lockwood-Mathews Mansion, March 27). Thanks to our hosts Jill Deupi, Debra Mecky, and Susan Gilgore.

##### **Overall Trends**

Overall, there was the sense that companies and corporate donors were still present, but that the marketing and community-relations aspects of funding were more important in corporate thinking than art-for-art’s-sake philanthropy. Several noted the plenitude of nonprofits asking for funds today and, although many local businesses want to help, there’s just less money to go around. As one said: “the challenge is to be grateful for everything and to work harder to identify more businesses. We’re not going to get one big check: it’ll be a lot of smaller checks.”

Pure arts philanthropy *is* increasingly rare, and arts funding has to be “sold” - we need to point out the particular benefits to the community, business, and economic development of funding culture. Many noticed there was more emphasis on “cross-sector” funding, and that it was in our own interest to be aware of other non-arts funding sources, like housing and social service agencies, that we can hook into. Younger generations are not giving as generously to the arts as to other sectors; so it would serve us well to connect with education or social service goals.

Municipal block grants were an example of funds that were usually designed for the under-served and usually were focused on community and economic development, yet Ryan had successfully worked with block grants when she was with the Fairfield Arts Council.

##### **Partnerships**

Better yet was to actively partner with other sectors. The Darien Arts Center had good examples of partnering (with a local kitchen showroom - for openings, and with the Darien Library for co-programming).

More actively partnering with other arts and culture organizations was also recommended - pooling resources and leads. Ryan spoke about the benefits of United Arts Funds, raising funds

from corporations and employees. There was a strong personal appeal from one member for us to be more collegial and less competitive in sharing leads (if a funder turns out not to be interested in your own program, they might be turned on by a colleague's). Another member felt the focus of locally-rooted groups like historical societies should be to partner with groups like Homes with Hope and others, working on issues from developmental delay to feeding the homeless. There were real benefits to be gained: from increasing one's audience to working on mutually beneficial programs, to learning from each other, often on a "what's worked for you?" basis. She viewed networking, and regularly meeting with peers, as productive fundraising activities.

### **Educating Ourselves/Educating Businesses**

On target with the core message of Chris Bruhl's talk about engaging with business, there was much discussion about understanding what businesses wanted in relationships with arts and cultural organizations. Many emphasized the importance of the "getting-to-know-you" conversations. First, there is the trick to get the one-on-one with a corporate representative, so it's critical to do ample research on the company and to have a broad menu of options when you meet, in case they are not interested in what you are proposing. What they *are* interested in is often surprising - so listening intently is key to finding a "hook." As one member reported, discovering that an executive at a company that was giving \$3,000 was a live-music fan, served to turn the conversation to how to structure a much larger donation package that included giving free or discounted tickets to corporate employees.

Another member recommended listening carefully to what potential donors want - especially for fundraising events. By listening to the donors, you may be led to putting on an unusual event for your organization (such as putting on a party on an expensive yacht to benefit a homeless organization) that can produce much larger-than-expected results.

One mistake we make is to talk only about *our* missions, rather than what executives or donors might be interested in. Talk more like them: about ROI (how many, how much?), or about 21st-century learning skills and "what we are doing for your employees of tomorrow." One member advised us to be aware of cost-related marketing approaches, rather than going in discussing your mission. But then, as Ryan reminded us, though you are cultivating relationships, at the end of the day, you still have to make the sales pitch - and, as a chamber rep reminded us, we have to have a well-prepared "elevator pitch."

Several stressed the value of our qualitative data - our stories - in gaining access and interest. In using the arts to work with kids with special needs, Neighborhood Studios realized the value of stories along the lines of "because I did this work, I got into college." While we always need the language about the inherent value of the arts, we also need to tell the stories. Collecting the anecdotes for ammunition is a key activity when we engage with business.

On the other side, we also heard about executives who had little idea of how to take advantage of facilities or events that they were sponsoring. One nonprofit now coaches businesses about how to use their facilities - and recommended our putting on a workshop for businesses about taking advantage of sponsored relationships with cultural organizations.

Overall, the importance of building relationships was strongly re-affirmed: especially in being able to establish multi-year funding or to be able to go back for subsequent funding.

### **Chambers**

Chambers of commerce were seen as an effective vehicle to reach many businesses (one of Bruhl's take-aways). Several members bore witness to the value of attending local chamber meetings. One regularly sends a representative ("someone who looks great in a suit") to every local chamber meeting and it has definitely paid off with a large number of leads. Another has found strong alliances with local businesses through the chamber, and one chamber director gave her full support to local nonprofits: "We're here to give you the names."

### **Board Education and Development**

One of the single biggest topics was how critical the role of the board was in making third-party introductions and establishing relationships with businesses. The majority of participants were frustrated and dis-satisfied with the level of interaction between their board members and potential business sponsors. Many recommended clearer guidelines, a board handbook, annual board-member report cards, and board education events in which staff expectations of board performance on the nonprofit-corporate interface were made clear. One veteran in the field reported that this message to boards has to be repeated - over and over. Having specified minimum amounts that board-members have to donate or raise was strongly recommended. As one put it: "'Give, Get or Get Off' should be every board's mantra."

On a positive note, it was recommended that board meetings should have some lively presentation of an organization's program (one went so far as to say they wanted the atmosphere of a Revival Meeting): board-members do have to be effective cheerleaders for nonprofits in the local and the business community.

One member spoke of the need to think about our organization's assets and to more pro-actively use them to excite the board and to gain community buy-in. She found her organization's programming was the most successful way of inspiring the board (and gaining

donors). Another spoke about making a video to show how kids actually do get excited by historic houses.

In conclusion, it was felt that members have a lot to learn from each other and their experiences engaging with businesses, that a further program involving corporate representatives would be valuable - as well as workshops on more effective board development.

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