

Turn The Megaphone Around

An AudienceWorks White Paper – Jon Hardie

[Alan Brown](#), of [WolfBrown](#), in "[What's Real Value](#)", raised interesting issues on value, evaluation, & accountability in their "On Our Minds" E-newsletter.

Woven deeply into our years of NPO management & consulting; we continue to find that sound, shared, evaluative data, is the real nectar of good decisions, innovation, creativity, and transformation.

Good Data: defined as: timely, accurate, relevant, accessible, and complete, vs. fragmented databases and staff in multiple isolated silos; provides a solid foundation for broad institutional alignment.

Good evaluative data informs transparency, as well as nimble and agile responsiveness. It also sustains a critical, "institutional intentionality", by building a shared, core awareness, understanding, agreement, buy-in and ownership of a dynamic vision & mission.

So, we ask, why is this perspective so antithetical to the perception of many NPO's and performing arts managers; who view evaluative data as "**penance for getting a grant**"; something you "**glom onto**" your grant app - after the fact - **because you have to**.

Our hunch; many Arts & NPO Managers don't have a handle on how to leverage evaluative data as a tool and powerful *asset*; and consequently, **don't see its value**. In much the same way that a patron doesn't see value in a typical, take-it-or-leave-it, fixed season subscription offer, from a push monologue, script driven, telemarketer - who interrupts your dinner.

Take-it-or-leave-it value propositions, "**If** you want your series from a telemarketer, or a grant from the foundation, **then** you must do "X", are experienced as often being shoved down recipient's throats.

Sadly, these propositions do not emerge from a conversation or a relationship, are not negotiable; and are often passively-aggressively, and reluctantly, accepted. Consequently, they have less buy-in and ownership than the Attila the Hun proposition; "*The beatings will continue until your morale improves!*"

Poignant examples of ailed take-it-or-leave-it value propositions, are the aghast and outraged e-book customers of [Amazon Kindle](#); who discovered that Amazon had unilaterally - and remotely - deleted books from their Kindle; that they believed that they had legitimately purchased; books written by, of all

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people, George Orwell, who prophetically described that very scenario - in a totalitarian future state!

We also suspect that the conspicuous absence of sustained, trusting, customer-centered relationships, built on value & loyalty - *other than with major donors* - is very often a direct result of the endemic, product-centered gladiator-culture, of both arts ticketing and the funding marketplace; where 9 out of 10 equally qualified, proposals are often rejected.

"C'mon, we're not getting married here, we're just doing what we have to do - and saying what we have to say, to get the money; put butts in seats, and make it through the season - it's no big deal!"

Ok, given that perception; why waste our time and money building sustained value? Why do we need to build relationships ... (with shared trust, awareness, understanding, agreement, buy-in and ownership)?

So, why then do we need to build broad institutional alignment, internally, within our stakeholder facing organizations, and have conversations with patrons, about what our value propositions need to look like?

Because it IS a big deal! *In our daily struggle for mindshare environment*, we do get stuck push-selling our take-it-or-leave-it value propositions; rather than listening to needs, and being responsive.

When we stop pushing our monologues, we become more open to spending more time listening, being transparent, building trust; while adding real value in our conversations with our clients and patrons - as [Jeff Bezos, CEO of Amazon](#), painfully acknowledged.

We are spending much more time facilitating & coaching organizations that want to plan, seamlessly integrate, and implement social media strategies; precisely because - when they have begun to listen, **they discover that there is sustained value in turning the megaphone around**.

It's No Surprise then, that there is a growing body of evidence that making the institutional decision, and then acting with shared institutional intentionality, to turning the megaphone around; does in fact, build and sustain relationships, real value and loyalty.

When institutions do get it right; take-it-or-leave-it-monologues tend to evaporate, they discover that

accountability, evaluation, relationships, and value, become seamlessly woven into the fabric of their new customer-centered engagement; one that is built on a sustained dialog of trust and transparency;

Promising Results: include incrementally changed perceptions, enlightened leveraging of data; OMG, pick-it-yourself subscriptions. Institutions who do invest in customer listening-centered relationships, often drive good results, and get the grants, while newly valued & appreciated Patrons, OMG ... now have a choice of performances, seats, and offers.

[See Pete Bradshaw's excellent Zappos Article in Ad Age:](#) "Brand Turns (their heroic customer service) Cost Center into an Unassailable Asset ..."

So, let's take a look at the process of implementing a social media strategy, as an intriguing metaphor for how you might want to pragmatically approach, and successfully engage, this transformative, value, evaluative, and accountability conundrum.

This "Social Media Thing" Many of our clients (Museums, Arts & Dance Companies, Presenting Organizations, Symphonies, to Regional Cultural Councils) have been asking for help navigating and seamlessly integrating, "This Web 2.0 / Social Media Thing", into their institutional strategic planning.

Social Media Rule #1: Spend lots of time listening. We ask what they've been doing. What's working and what isn't, and how do they know that? We ask, "What do you know about social media?" Invariably, the answer: "My Son or Daughter told me we should really have a Facebook page – So, We want one!"

Then we ask, "Ok, let's say that you do that, **"What do you want for outcomes?" "How",** we ask, **"are you going know, when you get there?"** and **"How will you define success, together - upfront?"**

The Drill: Many folks want to have a Facebook page, because it's *THE social media place to be du jour*; without wrapping their mind around the necessary core relationship building implications - for every stakeholder-facing person in their institution. Why, because every stakeholder-facing person in the institution, IS the institution, at the point of contact.

This is no different than putting a bumper sticker on your forehead that says "Nirvana"- and instantly believing that you found it; absent only the need to be free of your institutions reactive, impulsive, push-marketing-monologue, about what, when, and how

much to do next, because – "OMG! – OMG! The numbers are down and we have to do something!"

Sadly, in this product & vs. customer centered, institutional environment, **we only seem to know how to turn up the volume on the megaphone,** while we drive up the collective noise of our push marketing monologues; more print, more email lists, big bucks out the door, and more poor results.

If conversion rates, on these push monologue marketing efforts is 2-4%; then we are wrong in guessing what patrons want - and value - 98% of the time. While also observe, that the conversion rate of free, value-based, personal referrals in our networked relationships ... is a whopping 75%!

A walking-the-talk caveat: these *free referrals* from friends to friends, on your behalf, are not to be taken for granted; they are only made based on their ongoing relationships of trust and direct experience of transparency, and sustained value with you - over time ... and explicitly, **not** because you said so!

All customers are from Missouri! They detect very quickly, the difference between real "Street Cred" e.g., your genuine customer-centered institutional alignment & intentionality; incorporating a real dialog of trust, transparency, and value; AND, your hyped, push product-centered monolog of "just give me your money - wrapped in smoke and mirrors".

P.s. BS doesn't cut it. Your impassioned patrons won't hesitate to *instantly* twitter their pleasant - or not so pleasant - experiences - X 10; to their network of 600 friends of friends, with delightful - or absolutely devastating - effect. As in relationships and Social Media, Truth telling counts!

So don't go there! Customers are not disposable; churn & burn is a negative sum game - times 10. "If you mess up - fess up"; just like [Jeff Bezos of Amazon](#), or [David Neelman of Jet Blue](#), after Jet Blue left passengers on the NYC runway for 11 hours.

Time to give it up, and not make it up! Turn the megaphone around! Forget the foundation grant - for now.

Do This!

Go through these 4 steps, *twice*.

1. Internally, What do you all agree that you want for outcomes? Now, prioritize them - together

2. Now, how would you define success - together, in the same room, same place and same time?

3. Now, Make these outcomes SMART. Make each of those incremental steps that will get you from (Here = point A) to (Success=point B): **S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**chievable, **R**ealistic & **T**ime-based.

4. **Why Measurable?** So everyone knows where you are; you all know where you're going, and how you're doing at each step. So that, en route together, you're all in the same boat, rowing in the same direction; agile, nimble, creative, adaptive, responsive ... and voila, successful!

And, sigh, not at the end of the grant, where one delegates responsibility and assigns blame; and you turn in the evaluation; only to discover, belatedly, that it's too late, to use your en route data, to fix it.

If you want real value; deliver customer centered outcomes ... by turning the megaphone around.

Now go through this internal process, 1-4 (above), again, but this time turn the megaphone around, and listen, from your clients, customers and patron's perspective – and see what you come up with.

If those two process outcomes: (1) internal-product centered, (2) external customer-centered are not very, very, closely aligned; then it's time to pay more attention, and do more thoughtful listening.

p.s. Resist the temptation to fudge the data, and minimize the differences. They are what they are.

The Real Question: How are you going to bring these two process outcomes into seamless alignment, with your staff & patrons?

Here's great **slideshare** by Kelsey Ruger, given at Net Squared, Houston 2009, on reorienting NPO Sales Approaches and focus on real listening and relationships, [Sales Eye for the Non Profit Guy](#).

Social Media, calls this incremental and iterative process of getting it right: Wash Rinse and Repeat. First, you turn the megaphone around: then really listen, then join the conversation - adding value, then share your learning, adjust, and jump back in: **WR&R**

The Ah-Ha moment: As you finally begin to turn the institutional megaphone around (often described as turning a large oil tanker around in an estuary), evaluation becomes an intrinsic part of an exciting,

dynamic, value creating, trust building, relationship-building process. Your accountability is personal, and relationship based, and is not externally imposed.

Visualize shared goal setting, by jointly defining success upfront, jumping in together, while returning often to share your experiences, and your data; then once again, together as a team, nimbly re-imagining, responding, adapting, and continuing on toward your shared, realistic, achievable, and measurable objectives and outcomes ... WR & R.

The real payoff lies in the subtle and powerful institutional transformation inherent in this listening. It's often exhilarating for both the institution - and the customers - silos disappear;

informal work groups emerge; what was once a struggle for both the institution - and the patron - now becomes a series of iterative and incremental opportunities to get it right, together.

p.s. No one is giving up product excellence; they are expecting it; relationships plus emotions - all that is woven into the fabric of your engagement.

If you passionately believe that your institution - and your customers - need and deserve *way better* outcomes - and real value - ask, listen & have at it!

Turn the Megaphone Around - Together. (Don't ask permission, ask for forgiveness) as you build real value, real ownership, and real accountability - that is customer relationship centered, and grounded in awareness, understanding, agreement and buy-in.

Just do it!

So, what do you think? Can you imagine what your customer-centered & focused, institutionally-aligned, arts or funding organization will look and act like, in this complex economic environment; of swirling, conversational rich, social media opportunities for networks of trust and value based relationships?

Tune into the next episode of: *Ok, We Turned the Megaphone Around, Now What? OMG, Look at that, LOL they went viral!*