

“Message”

Local Arts Agencies Field: Crisis and Opportunity

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There are at least three strategic components to the MESSAGE:

- 1) What are the messages;
- 2) Who should get the message; and
- 3) Who should deliver the message.

Why do we need a message? If you have to ask this question you fall into one of two categories:

- 1) You have no problem selling the arts in your community and can go out shopping now;
or
- 2) You are in the denial stage of mourning over inadequate or lost arts funding and need to take my word about the probability that you have at least anger to get through before you reach this transcendental stage of recognizing the need for a message.

So what is the message?

First, it is important to realize that there are many important messages and even permutations of messages. I have heard this syndrome referred to as the supermarket of arts arguments -- or a menu of messages.

In this “era of Ashcroft,” George Orwell’s words take on a special meaning. To paraphrase, Orwell said, “the restatement of the obvious is the first duty of civilized man.” You should use the arts messages that have been well-crafted and not assume that they are understood and accepted by your political and civic leaders.

Without belaboring them, here are some of the standard ones:

- There has never been a great city that did not have a great cultural life;
- The arts industry is an important economic force in our community;
- Artists and the arts are pioneers in revitalizing neighborhoods;
- The arts change kids lives – and even improve students’ test scores;
- The arts help to help a place retain and attract business;
- The arts give destinations a distinctive flavor and a competitive advantage in tourism;
- Let’s get personal: the arts help define elected officials and business leaders as progressive thinkers;

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- Let's get dramatic: the arts are what we leave as a lasting legacy for future generations; and
- Let's get shameless: anyone who goes to the arts will take the trouble to go to vote and by the way, the board members of arts groups are the leaders of our community and tend to be the people who make campaign contributions.

You can shape these messages with statistics – “the arts have a \$538 million impact in our community and employ 8,458 people.” You can sell the message with a case study or vignette – “my aunt was in a coma and we wheeled her into a Miami City Ballet performance of “Jewels,” the curtain went up and miraculously, so did she.”

Remember, keep it brief. It is deathly to go on and on with too many statistics or about too many family members who were healed by the arts.

Some good permutations of messages that we have used recently in budget battles include:

- It is senseless and wasteful to cut the budget now after all of the years of investment that you have made in the arts; and
- If you are building or recently have built cultural facilities in your community you can say: after investing five zillion dollars in building these buildings, it is just dumb to pull the rug out from the arts groups that are meant to populate these cultural facilities.

So, who should get these messages?

A wise former board chairman once pointed out to me that in order to increase our budget we needed only to convince 8 people – that is a majority of our County Commission and our Mayor. Suddenly, this seemed very do-able.

Similarly, every community has leadership clusters – leaders tend to be opinion makers. They include the President of the Chamber of Commerce, the CEO of Convention and Visitors Bureau, the Publisher – or editorial board of the local newspaper, the Superintendent of the School Board and so on. While it is noble to want your message to be embraced by every living citizen of your community, it is more effective to indoctrinate opinion-makers. Chose wisely from the menu of messages and match them strategically to the leader based on sizing up their personality and learning to translate our message into their language. This infiltration needs to occur from a multitude of directions so that it seems to be coming from everywhere. You can do this economically by targeting leadership.

Finally, who should deliver the message? We tend to be an ego-driven field of arts administrator/practitioners or at the very least, just get worn down and believe that we have to do everything ourselves. Instead, invest the time to convert important people to the cause and have them deliver message. Here's a riddle: What do these people have in common?

- an African-American soft-spoken, community conciliation specialist with the US Justice Department;
- a courtly, publisher of the oldest Spanish daily newspaper in Miami who descends from a distinguished Nicaraguan family;

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- a cigar-chomping, outspoken lobbyist who raises hundreds of thousands of dollars for political campaigns; and
- an alluring, Barcelonan who runs an international corporation and can charm normal mortals into doing whatever she asks?

These are the chairs of my board for the last 10 years. They embrace and they have delivered the messages. It works - our budget has tripled over this period and is now more than 11.5 million dollars a year.