

“Metrics, outcomes,” or to quote Randy Cohen, “What’s treasured is measured.”

Aye, there’s the rub for both fund seekers and grant seekers in the current economic climate, and alas, as far as can be seen in the future. How do we balance the needs of arts organizations for unrestricted operating support with the stated needs of business and foundation funders for more measurable goals and results that coincide with their respective funding priorities?

So let’s drop back a few years and review. In the 60’s , 70’s and 80’s when many of the United Arts Funds (UAFs), Arts & Business Councils (ABCs) and Business Committees for the Arts (BCAs) were established, the premise and process was relatively simple. Business and civic leaders recognized the need to support the growing diversity of arts groups, beyond the traditional symphony and museums. In communities across the country, business arts leaders formed BCA affiliates to pledge their money, volunteers and company resources to improve the quality of life and foster economic development through the arts. At the same time, ABC affiliates were created to leverage new funds, resources and leadership from the business community to support the arts. United Arts Funds, based on the United Way model, offered central funding organizations with a “one annual donation to support all the arts” which businesses recognized as being in their best interests. Businesses (and their CEO’s) could get the benefit of knowing they were supporting the arts and at the same time, reduce the growing number of individual solicitations and the somewhat problematic situation of peers hitting each other up to support their respective arts groups – “you give to me and I’ll give to you.” Now it was “We gave to the UAF so ask them.” And for many years the model worked just fine. Businesses were happy to give one (supposedly) large chunk of cash, arts groups got cash to be used wherever needed and developed other revenue sources from earned and membership/contributed income to produce and present art.

But then an interesting thing happened. Like many other community activities, the rise in individual income and the baby boom population curve (the pig through the python), the arts, all the arts, not just the old line institutions got popular. Alternative theatres grew as the regional rep presented fewer and fewer new or edgy plays. Non-profit galleries exhibited new and controversial works of “local” artists since the museums were still showing old masters, works from the permanent collection, and an occasional traditional exhibit on loan from another large museum. Festivals sprouted like a French flower garden – ethnic and folk festivals, art and crafts, chamber and jazz festivals, dance festivals all serving as an entry point into the arts world created new audiences and new demand for more and different arts groups. The need for cash increased at a much greater rate than funders could provide.

Enter the government – cities and counties were tapped, new taxes like hotel and restaurant taxes were approved, state arts councils made grants. But with very few exceptions, public dollars required public service. Money was available for accessibility (free events), for underserved or education programs, for public art or other activities. But not unrestricted operating support and generally not solely the province of the old line institutions. These grants required new programs and more staff.

Businesses, foundations, UAFs and donors came under even more pressure to support the quality and diversity of all these activities, and indeed there was and is quality and are well deserving of support. And in many cases more funds were raised – new donors from smaller businesses were invited in; individuals in workplace giving campaigns were offered a partnership in arts support. The funding pie grew bigger but many more pieces were now being cut and the slices got smaller and smaller and in many cases, some groups got no pie at all.

And then we heard about sponsorship! WOW! Free market economics, and even better, arts managers could bypass traditional funding and go directly to the marketing division of any large company. “Put your name on this play, concert, or exhibit. We’ll give you 20 tickets to opening night, make a speech thanking you, have a reception for your employees and customers, get your name in the program, the ads, take the money from your marketing budget rather than your philanthropy budget – is this a great country or what!” And just as quickly, the funding decision was made, not by the CEO who may also serve on the board of the arts group or play golf with one, but by the marketing folks. And it was no longer about operating support to produce or present art, but what size font, how many tickets, and how many potential customers can we contact.

Sponsorship and having the marketing folks make the decision worked so well for the arts that other nonprofits got on board. The heart fund, the boys and girl scouts, the hospital, and many others came to the table. Employees who volunteered with the social and health organizations came to the marketing folks and sold walks and runs, tables and t-shirts, and even arts and craft festivals asking artists and arts groups to donate to the charity.

However, recently the economy ain’t doing so good, to be perfectly frank. Funders are faced with more and more difficult choices, poverty and homelessness, education and dropout rates. Now even the CEO and the marketing folks had to make decisions on their shrinking community support. And they also had to develop some “metrics” (ah, that word comes around again) to help define and evaluate the limited funds they could provide.

All the while UAF’s continued to provide “unrestricted operating grants” to as many arts activities as funds allowed. And what did we do for those donors. Name in the program as a contributor to the arts fund, employees might get a discount, maybe a one time a year recognition lunch, and the knowledge you are supporting a lot of arts groups. What and where are the metrics here? And do they coincide with your business giving goals. And guess what, UAFs find themselves at a competitive disadvantage in some cases simply due to different or reduced business funding priorities on the arts, or in many cases, a lack of identifiable program goals and criteria (m,mm,mmm... trics) that enable marketing managers, employee giving committees or other decision makers to make informed decisions on arts support.

So, here we are Ollie! Hmm, what do we do now Stan? Our organizations need cash, real cash, not cash that requires more work for an already strapped staff. There are still thousands of people in our communities who are not attending and who can pay. There are artists creating images through technology as well as painting, clay and goodness knows what else. Actors and directors want to do

more than the 3rd revival of Oklahoma, the music director of the symphony has tired arms from all the three B's and is desperate to commission a new piece from that fabulous composer she heard about at the ASOL conference. Schools are dropping arts courses because it's difficult to measure (again that word!!!) achievement on standardized tests. And funders, seeing more and more non-profits, including arts groups doing the same things are concerned about the cost of overhead, program duplication versus what can pay for direct services that have a, yup, measurable impact. Funders are saying "tell me specifically what I am buying with my donation/sponsorship (cash is cash on the bottom line) and how it coincides with our company charitable goals."

We believe that the review criteria and metrics for allocating arts funding will better inform and articulate the case for support from business, individual, foundation, and government funders. Perhaps we can once again borrow from our united way colleagues and offer a check off or percent/dollar allocation of a major gift. "Of my \$10,000 contributions, allocate \$3,000 to individual artist grants and programs (my mother/wife/brother's sister is an artist and I understand the need to support individual artists), \$4,000 to Education (our kids need art in school), \$1500 to creation of new works (I don't like all that modern stuff, but creativity is important in growing the knowledge based economy), and \$1500 to grants that encourage arts groups to work together (about time – how many [insert art discipline here] groups can this community support anyway." Some % for ABC, BCA and UAF operating support off the top, of course.

In any case, we need to make a stronger argument than "your contribution helps the museum pay the utility bill" in spite of the fact that we as arts managers know how critical that is.

The Green Paper Blog - So here is your turn to help us answer some hard questions or provide solutions about private sector support for the arts.

- Is the failure of the arts to maintain market share among providers of contributed support a short-term problem related to increased social service, health, and educational needs, or will it persist?
- How do we define the relevance of arts to business in the face of urgent and basic social needs?
- Are funding losses a symptom of a more fundamental problem of donors and funders not appreciating the arts?
- How can we engage the business community as arts participants in ways other than cash donations?
- Foundations appear to be dropping the arts from their funding roster. How can we reverse the trend?
- Can we find a better way to tell the story of the benefits of the arts on social issues like health care?
- Should UAFs change from majority general operating support grants to a multilevel approach to foster artistic development, audience development, and arts economic development, including detailed review criteria (YES metrics – damn it!)?

Please comment, cry bullsh#*, applaud but we need your perspective.

And thanks to AFTA for making this dialogue (blogalogue?)possible.

Andrew Witt, Executive Director
Cultural Council of Richland and Lexington Counties
Columbia, SC
803-231-3131 – andy@getcultured.org

www.smartarts.info