

TCG Fall Forum 2008

Radical Shifts: Governing Ahead of the Curve

Workshop Session: *Articulating Our Value in Critical Times*

A messaging session facilitated by Michael Maso (managing director, Huntington Theatre Company), which will help theatres articulate their value to all of their stakeholders (funders, elected officials, audiences and the community, and specifically to those who can help theatres maintain their tax-exempt status).

Saturday, November 8, 2008

Michael Maso:

My name is Michael Maso, I'm with the Huntington Theatre Company, and I've been asked to talk about a series of issues around the central issue of communication.

About a month ago, there was an article that really stood out for me. It was an article from the *L.A. Times*, and it was written by Robert Reich, who many of you will remember as Bill Clinton's Secretary of Labor, who afterwards I think taught at Brandeis and I think he's now at Stanford. The article was entitled, "Is Harvard Really a Charity?" He goes on to talk about charitable donations and the role of the federal government, of course, in providing tax-exemptions and tax deductions for charitable organizations for the gifts that are made to us as charitable organizations. One paragraph in particular I think sums up the issue. He said, "I'm all in favor of supporting arts and our universities, but let's face it, these aren't really charitable contributions. They're often investments in the lifestyles the wealthy already enjoy and want their children to have too. They're also investments in prestige, especially if they result in the family name being engraved on the new wing of an art museum or symphony hall." Now, we're facing a fairly challenging world, but if we've lost the short-left-wing-baby-boomer-Jews-with-beards, we're in trouble! Our goal in this session is to engage people in a conversation about community and about communication to our different stakeholders. There are really three targets that we're talking about. We agree that we need to communicate to our stakeholders, to be clear about our value and our values and how we articulate those values to the people who we need to support us. We know that the environment is tougher, so our arguments, our ways of articulating our values need to get clearer.

What we plan to do is to break the group up into four different sections to talk and to come back, with recommendations for how we should best articulate our values to these constituencies. We expect there will be references about how theatre affects people personally, our civic value, our impact in education, and community values. We have four areas that we're going to talk about. One of them is this issue of the tax-exemption, and we raise it, not just because it's Robert Reich, but because this is an idea which is gaining steam. We talk about the NEA and its current appropriation

of about \$140 million. Maybe under a new Administration we'll get \$160 million someday. But our tax-exempt status provides billions of dollars and the whole under-pinning of our business model is at stake if somehow there's a reduction of the deductibility of contributions to arts organizations.

So we have four issues that we want to talk about, one of them will be tax exemption. There are four boards around the room, flip charts, and someone will be facilitating and someone will be taking notes. Group One will be led by Susan Booth, and will focus on articulating value to our communities—all of the reasons that we are important to our communities. Group Two is going to be led by Tim Shields and will focus on articulating our value to our elected officials—local, state and federal. Group Three will be led by Paula Tomei, and Paula is going to be talking on articulating our value to our funders. Our funders, we think, are going to be pulled in many different directions, so we need to be able to articulate our value. And finally, the threat to our tax-exempt status, will be led by Doug Brown. This is a real threat that we're facing. At the end of the session, each of the groups will present their messages to all of us. Come up with some good messages! Thank you.

Articulating Our Value to Our Community

Led by Susan Booth

1) Define Community: "community is comprised of multiple communities...what is our value to these multiple communities?"

- catalytic for freedom of speech
- development of critical thinking
- the enlightenment of a civic democracy
- a unifying factor
- the provider of transformational and aspirational experiences
- a shared space and a shared experience for diverse people to inhabit
- influential civic identity
- cultural communion
- financial impact

2) What Community Would Lose: "Ultimately, hopefully the work speaks, the work demonstrates the values, but what we are all up against, is if we are so busy selling disparate programmatic activity, are we in fact selling an institutional value-driven brand? We have focused on institutional brand, and messaging the essential role that we play in a community."

What do we look like...

- Without *humanism*?
- Without *expression*?
- Without an opportunity to *hear all voices*?
- Without *story*?
- Without *live experience of active cultural communion*?

3) How do we message this: “What we kept coming back to is, we need to be learners, we need to be in those communities as active citizens, listening more than we’re talking. We need to deploy our audiences as the articulators of our value, rather than simply stating them as institutions.”

- Research community demographics and psychographics
- Ask ourselves if we are “self-policing”
- If money, past history and tradition were not an issue:
 - we would make theatre free,
 - have celebrity endorsed theatre
 - have unlimited outreach programs
 - consider breaking the rules and changing the traditions

Articulating Our Value to Our Legislators

Led by Tim Shields & Scott Levy

1) Tips and Advice:

- Legislature has to hear from their constituents or they will not hear your message
- Develop the relationship with legislators first, the ask is secondary
- Be specific about your figures, about who your base is.

2) Arguments: “We have different arguments that we can all put in our toolkit.”

- We bring in tourism dollars
- We bring economic impact on our communities
- We attract businesses
- We create economic development and the return on that investment
- We have educational impact
- We make theatre accessible
- We reflect our community inside our theatres
- We exist as a public trust and organizations lead part of the cultural legacy of our community

- We provide value to the constituents of our legislators
- We create jobs
- We receive awards
- We are a part of the creative economy

3) Wish List: “We have our wish list for federal arts policies”

- re-address the importance of arts education, potentially by reversing No Child Left Behind
- We want funding through appropriations, not just through grants from the NEA
- We want American Art: by and for and of the people
- We also want international cultural exchange
- We would like President-elect Obama to not tell people just to volunteer for the Red Cross, but for the cultural institutions
- Let’s get an arts staff representative in the White House

Articulating Our Value to Our Funders

Led by Paula Tomei & Will Critzman

1) Different Messages:

- We are a part of renaissances, and we are coming back in communities that need inspiration,
- The unique nature of theatre,
- We shouldn’t be thinking of ourselves as not-for-profit, we should be thinking of ourselves as *for-social-profit*,
- We have an artistic purpose,
- Art is soul food.

2) How to deliver different messages:

- Keep our message donor or funder-centered - we stress that over and over again,
- Align with our municipalities or our cities,
- Educate the general populous of the theatre field as historic preservation.
- Get specific with the story and how important it is to take our constituents with us to potential funder meetings—if you are working with children, take them; young people, take them; take your actors with you when you go to meet your funders,
- Create new business models within the arts community: what does that look like - is it partnerships; is it new businesses; is it innovation; is it new organizations?

- Set clear metrics on the outset so that we can report on them in a clear and concise manner that is compelling at the end of our story,
- Put our benefits and our incentives, and exactly what it is that we give to each person who walks through our doors at the forefront of our message.

3) Case Study: “Bernadette Peters said it three weeks ago when we launched TDF here in New York: ‘Food feeds people, art feeds the soul.’ And this is what the basic value proposition of theatre came down to for us when we were talking about funders. We put the specific case study to ourselves: what happens if you go to a corporation that has said, ‘We are laying off a third of our workforce, we fund health and human service organizations, and we’re experiencing a great homeless population problem in our city. That’s what we want to fund.’ You as a theatre organization are walking into that corporation and what do you say to them? We talked about putting ‘soul food’ right at the top. We talked about going back to the message that was delivered this morning—Maso’s hierarchy of needs—theatre is working at the inspirational level, at the aspirational level. That, essentially, money is given for two purposes: either to save lives or to change lives and we have identified that theatre *always* changes lives. It can also save lives.

So what we wanted to talk about is putting the art at the top, addressing exactly what it is that we do well, which is to inspire, create change, re-inspire and re-invest in people. We talked about imagination, not just innovation, but imaging the future. Artists as artists imagining what a better world looks like, this is what we do, we should be putting it at the front of our funding proposals.”

Articulating Our Value: Tax-Exempt Status

Led by Doug Brown & Susan Medak

1) Messages: “Our inherent value to the society, our economic value to the society, our capacity to change lives, our capacity to be a catalyst for change, etc.”

- Money from the government allows greater access, we are positive that art isn’t only for the wealthy, so that everyone can have access to the arts despite income and disabilities, etc.
- Demographic diversity of cultural experience
- Civilized society depends on culture
- Structure democratic allows individual to make decision

2) Core American Values: “ultimately, we felt that the argument for preserving our nonprofit status was a pretty straight-forward one, and ultimately, a reflection of what many people consider core American values. And that is that government investment of funds, seeds, or is a catalyst for,

individual investment... So that with an investment of dollars from the government we leverage dollars from individuals, dollars from individuals is spread broadly and seeds innovation.”

- individual investment creates a *broad diversity* of investment in a wide variety of programs
- which means that we don't have government sponsored art - *we don't have wealth sponsored art.*

3) In Hard Times: “you go back to the Great Depression, we need to remind our government representatives that the arts were supported during that time...the images and the stories, the photographs and the pictures that were created by artists to help us understand that moment in time.”

Michael Maso:

The reason that this was so critical to get the people in the room to think about it is so that we're not just talking to ourselves, or to the people who work in the field, but that we're all able to do this together. Action Alerts are sent to each of the TCG theatres. And the Action Alerts arrive in a couple of email boxes at each theatre. And the truth is, is that often we may read it and say, “Aha, that's really interesting,” and then the phone rings. Or, we may save it in our email box along with 3,000 other messages. Maybe, we're supposed to pass it along to somebody whose job it is to circulate it wider to the staff. Maybe we're supposed to be giving it to the board. And we don't do it.

So the message we have for you today is that, in fact, for those of you who are trustees, if you're not getting Action Alerts from your staff, do something about it. For those of you who are staff members, if you're not circulating information to trustees, and if you don't have a structure whereby we have response... We have an enormously powerful field: we have the rich people that Mark Halperin talked about last night who are going to get heard at government offices, and we have volume. And we have passion. And what we're not very good at right now is turning all those assets into weapons to be used. And the one thing we know is, the one thing that's constant through all of this is that we've got some very difficult times ahead and we've got to use every tool in our toolbox. So please be part of TCG's efforts. TCG and the PAA will lead us to Congress in victory, with your active participation. Thank you.

