Axelson Review

INSPIRE. EDUCATE. CONNECT. FALL 2008

The Axelson Centercelebrating 10 years of service!

If Nils Axelson were with us today, I wonder what he might say about the current Axelson Center for Nonprofit Management. I know that I am awestruck when I consider how far we have come—and the impressive future that lies ahead.

The initial construct of the Axelson Center was as an academic center for North Park University students. Over 10 years ago, our founders raised funds to institute a full-time faculty member at North Park dedicated to teaching nonprofit classes and conducting research. Melissa Morriss-Olson, Ph.D., was the first to hold that position, and her initial research led to the creation of what is now one of the most comprehensive centers for nonprofit education in the country.

Through a 1998 survey of 4,000 area



nonprofit leaders, Dr. Morriss-Olson uncovered a significant void in the educational offerings for Chicago's nonprofit professionals. From that research grew the rationale for a comprehensive nonprofit center that would reach far beyond the walls of the University, providing a wide spectrum of nonprofit services from one-day workshops to undergraduate and graduate degrees.

Although the strategies and practices have expanded beyond the original vision, the basic concepts of the Center have remained intact. We will always be committed to providing ethics-based education. What

continues on the next page

Ask the Expert

Strategic nonprofit writing: The essentials



Dalya F. Massachi, MA, founder of Writing for Community Success, specializes in helping nonprofit professionals advance their missions through outstanding written materials. She has worked with nonprofits for more than 17 years, as a consultant, trainer, writing coach, grant writer, and organizer.

As a nonprofit manager, you already know that you need to regularly communicate with your stakeholders—in print or online. You understand the strategic importance of developing outstanding marketing and fundraising materials. After all, it is not only a question of building short-term "market share;" it's also a long-term sustainability issue.

But with so many other pressing priorities, you may end up with precious few hours (or moments!) to get your thoughts down on paper. You need to know how to make the best use of that writing time. Allow me to offer a few pointers.

1) Create and advance your brand.

Every piece you write—whatever its own individual purpose—should have one overarching goal: to help promote your organization's brand.

What do I mean by "brand?" Your "brand" is your reputation, your essence, your identity, your personality, your promise. It is what your organization stands for.

Ask yourself: When someone hears about your organization, what set of images, attributes, feelings, and ideas do you want them to associate with it?

The answer is your brand.

One key aspect of branding is emphasizing your uniqueness. To make your organization stand out, you need to highlight what distinguishes it from similar groups. You must show how your organization is uniquely positioned to address a specific need that your community has expressed.

For instance: Does your organization deal with a particular aspect of an issue that no one else focuses on? Do you have a breakthrough approach or method? Do you work with a severely underserved community? Do you offer a product or service that solves a compelling social problem but is not readily available anywhere else? Do you have a history

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Strategic nonprofit writing: The essentials (continued from page 1)

that has positioned you as the 'go-to' organization in your community for years?

Those distinguishing characteristics are key parts of your brand and bear repeating (over and over again).

2) Engage your specific readers.

Nonprofit writing must be reader-centered and not writer-centered. You have to shift your attention, and your preoccupations, from yourself to your readers. After all, they care about themselves, their communities, and their impact much more than they care about your organization.

To write to them is to engage in an intimate conversation with them. And for that, you need to know whom you are addressing, and—most importantly—what they want to get out of conversing with you. How do you do that?

The good news is that your document will, most likely, be read by one person at a time. In a sense, you and your reader will create a private world—together. That means that you can write toward only that one person.

So, try to visualize a "typical" reader (or maybe two or three). You want to make sure that what you have to say is going to be understood. While each reader will interpret your words differently, you can do your best to make it easy for her or him to integrate what you are saying.

Ask yourself: Who is your intended reader, and what information is of most interest to him or her?

You probably have in mind several distinct groups of potential readers. You

need to find out as much as you can about each one.

3) Emphasize benefits more than features.

Do you know the big question on the mind of every reader of your organization's material? It's this: "What's in it for me?"

As far as your readers are concerned, it's all about the benefits you can offer them. You want to emphasize how your organization's product or service improves the lives of your constituents and their communities.

Ask yourself: How will your work improve the lives of your readers and their community, in the short and the long term?

Your stakeholders want to find ways to benefit both themselves and the world around them. So we might want to edit their big question to now read: "What's in it for me and us?"

Here are just a few possible benefits that your organization may offer your readers, both tangible and psychological/emotional:

- A convenient opportunity, despite their hectic lives, to make a difference in their community.
- A chance to serve as a community resource—to share their good fortune or give something back in a way that matters to them.
- Access to unique expertise that addresses a key problem in a socially responsible manner.
- Interactions with other people with whom they share values, beliefs, concerns, and struggles.
- · Feelings of being kind, generous,

- trustworthy, helpful, important, conscious, and contributing citizens.
- Improved morale, excitement, or inspiration.
- The knowledge that they are empowering themselves and others to make their own decisions.

Keep these three essential points in mind as you go about crafting your written messages. They will help you get the most "bang" for your writing "buck."

This article is excerpted from Dalya's 2009 book, Writing to Make a Difference: 25 Powerful Techniques to Boost Your Community Impact. You can pre-order it until December 31, 2008, for a 15 percent discount, and subscribe to her free e-newsletter at www.dfmassachi.net.

The Axelson Center–celebrating 10 years of service! (continued from page 1)

has changed drastically is our reach. Every year we touch the lives of thousands of nonprofit professionals, helping them to be more effective managers and leaders. The payoff is profound: a community with better schools, cleaner air, healthier families, safer parks, quality arts—the list of organizations impacted by the Axelson Center is 2,000 strong and growing every day.

That indeed is something to be proud about.

Pier C. Rogers, Ph.D. Director, The Axelson Center

The Axelson Center Timeline of Significant Events

1992

Nils Axelson retires from Covenant Benevolent Institutions after 40 years of service.

1997

Friends and colleagues of Nils Axelson establish an endowed faculty position at North Park University.

1998

Research uncovers the need for additional nonprofit educational opportunities.

2000

The first symposium takes place on North Park's campus.

2000

The first nonprofit graduate and certificate students begin classes.

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IN THE TOOLBOX

Creating winning grants for small organizations

Joy Skjegstad is a nonprofit management and fundraising consultant and the author of Winning Grants to Strengthen Your Ministry and Starting a Nonprofit at Your Church, both published by the Alban Institute. She will teach two Axelson Center workshops on March 3, 2009.

When I offer training on grant writing around the country, people always ask me: "What do funders really want?" I've found that if you consider this question carefully and put yourself in the funder's shoes, you'll end up writing a stronger proposal.

So imagine you are a program officer for a major foundation in your area. You receive 50 proposals to review, all focused on improving the educational achievement of youth. Your foundation will probably be able to fund only about 10 or 15 of the 50 proposals. How would you choose which ones to support?

In the process of writing my book Winning Grants to Strengthen Your Ministry, I conducted a number of interviews with the staff members of foundations and corporate giving programs. I asked them: "What makes a grant proposal stand out from all the others that a funder receives?" and "What makes a program or organization seem worthy of funding?"

This is what they said:

1) The proposal matches the funder's values.

Read the funder's guidelines (usually on the website) carefully before you write your proposal. If your organization or program fits with the guidelines, make sure you explain



how in your proposal. The number one complaint of foundation program officers is groups that send off the same generic proposal to everyone, failing to consider the unique requirements of each funder.

2) You have support from other foundation and corporate giving programs.

Most funders like to run in "packs," supporting groups that their colleagues in other funding organizations have supported as well. This can make securing that first grant difficult, but once you get it, other foundation and corporate funding may follow.

3) You have measurable outcomes for your programs.

Foundation and corporate leaders aren't just looking for needs to fill, they are looking for concrete results to invest in. Before you seek grant funding, develop measurable outcomes for each of your programs that answer the question: "What will change in the lives of participants as a result of our work?" A transitional housing program might track whether participants move into stable housing, or secure living-wage employment, for example.

4) You collaborate with other organizations in your area.

Funders like to see that you are working together with other organizations in your field or geographic area so that duplication is reduced and effectiveness is improved. You might plan a project together, or refer customers back or forth, or co-locate in the same space, for example.

5) You have demonstrated success.

Funders usually like to support groups that have demonstrated the capacity to run their organization and its programs effectively. So grant funding is usually more possible after a nonprofit has been at it for awhile. If you are in "start-up" mode, grant funding can be hard to come by, but you could conduct a pilot to prove effectiveness of your concept or use a model that has been tried elsewhere.

6) Your organization is financially sound and you have the documents to prove it.

Funders don't like to support deficits and usually stay away from groups that don't have the appropriate financial documents. Expect to attach an annual budget, a recent financial report, and a copy of your annual audit to any grant proposal that you send out.

Foundation and corporate staff have a difficult job: making grants to just a fraction of the groups that submit proposals. Make their job easier by thinking through the issues described above and addressing them in your grant proposal.

2003

North Park's undergraduate nonprofit program begins. It is now affiliated with the national certifying organization, American Humanics, Inc.

2004

The professional workshop series begins.

2004

The Greater Chicago Nonprofit Gateway makes its debut (http://gateway. northpark.edu).

2004

Nonprofit graduate online courses begin.

2006

The Center launches the first BootCamp for New Nonprofit Leaders. BOARD CORNER—ASK THE EXPERT

Conflict of interest

David Renz, Ph.D., is a nationallynoted researcher and scholar in the field of nonprofit organization studies, particularly in the areas of nonprofit governance and board effectiveness. Dr. Renz is director of the Midwest Center for Nonprofit Leadership at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. He will be conducting an Axelson Center workshop on board development on April 2, 2009.



What exactly is a "conflict of interest" and what does it mean for nonprofit boards?

The phrase conflict of interest

is often used to describe a problem of legal or ethical concern, yet the nature of this problem often is not well understood. Fundamentally, the issue is about organizational loyalty and fairness, and conflict of interest generally refers

to a situation in which a board member (or any significant decision maker) has interests of his or her own that are—or likely will be—in conflict with the best interest of the organization. These may be financial or business interests, for example, such as selling your business's services or products to the organization on whose board you sit. The issue is that you are making a profit (your own interest) instead of ensuring that, from an objective perspective, the organization is getting what is best for its needs (the organization's interest).

Because each board member has a duty to place the interest of the nonprofit foremost in any dealings with the organization, the existence of a conflict of interest is a problem. A common misconception is that board members cannot have conflicts of interest with the organization on whose board they serve. The problem is not with the existence of a conflict—indeed, many board members are named to a board for the very expertise or business experience that results in such

conflicts—but with how it is handled. The board member's obligation when a real or potential conflict exists is to disclose this situation to the board and then avoid participating in both the deliberations and decision making associated with the conflict situation.

The board member should not be present at the time the matter is discussed to ensure that neither overt nor subtle pressure is applied (or appears to have been applied). It is essential for each organization and board to have a conflict of interest policy that makes clear the organization's expectations for such circumstances.

In some organizations, the likelihood of such conflicts existing is great enough that a part of the policy requires annual disclosure of information by members and executives that would flag the potential for such conflicts. This information is shared with the board to help members anticipate and proactively manage what might otherwise become a serious problem.

Removable magnet:



2007

The undergraduate nonprofit degree for adult learners begins.

2008

The Axelson Center begins offering specialized on-site trainings.

2009

The Axelson Center celebrates 10 years of service.

Your Feedback

The Axelson Review is published quarterly by the Axelson Center for Nonprofit Management at North Park University, which serves the educational needs of nonprofit professionals through degrees and certificate programs, on-site trainings, and an annual symposium series that addresses the contemporary issues and challenges confronting nonprofit organizations. For comments or feedback regarding the content of the Axelson Review, please email cbeall@northpark.edu or call (773) 244-5747.





THE TENTH ANNUAL SYMPOSIUM FOR NONPROFIT PROFESSIONALS AND VOLUNTEERS

Symposium: May 13, 2009 — Post Conference Institute: May 14, 2009

North Park University, Chicago

Forces for Good

Key Practices that Transform Organizations

Keynote Address: Leslie
Crutchfield, co-author of
the award-winning 2007
publication, Forces for
Good: The Six Practices of
High-Impact Nonprofits

Equip your organization to become a more fluid alliance-builder by attending the Tenth Annual Symposium for Nonprofit Professionals and Volunteers. Blending cutting-edge theory with the highly practical, the Symposium features 40 expert speakers and nonprofit leaders who will set the framework for transitioning from an organization with high hopes to one with high impact.

For additional information or to register, please visit www.northpark.edu/axelson or call (773) 244-5799.

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at North Park University in Chicago

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Axelson Center upcoming workshops

DECEMBER 4, 2008, 9-II A.M.

Direct Mail Marketing for Nonprofits (Free Workshop)

Rick Schildgen and Larry Urewicz, CL Graphics, Inc.

January 30, 2009, 9 a.m.-noon

Financial Modeling: A Roadmap to Fiscal Health

Tim O'Brien, Ph.D., School of Business and Nonprofit Management, North Park University

February 12, 2009, 9 A.M.-4 P.M.

Miracle Major Gifts

Jimmie R. Alford, LL.D., LH.D., The Alford Group

February 25, 2009, 9 a.m.–noon

Social Entrepreneurship

Cren McMath, MBA, School of Business and Nonprofit Management, North Park University

March 3, 2009, 9 a.m.–noon

Grant Writing for Your Ministry

Joy Skjegstad, Skjegstad Training and Consulting

March 3, 2009, I-4 P.M.

Starting a Nonprofit at **Your Church**

Joy Skjegstad, Skjegstad Training and Consulting

March 19, 2009, 9 a.m.–4 p.m.

Advanced Prospect Research

Christina Pulawski, Christina Pulawski Consulting

MARCH 24, 2009, 9 A.M.-4 P.M.

Start Your Own Consulting Business

Jimmie R. Alford, LL.D., LH.D., The Alford Group

APRIL 2, 2009, 9 A.M.-4 P.M.

Developing High Power Boards

David Renz, Ph.D., Midwest Center for Nonprofit Leadership, University of Missouri-Kansas City

Registration information, instructor bios, and further details are online at www.northpark.edu/axelson or call (773) 244-5799.