

If You Didn't Exist, Would Somebody Invent You?

By Brydon M. DeWitt, President

The question posed by the title of this month's newsletter may seem impertinent, but it is important that every nonprofit organization asks this question now and, at least, once per year. It gets at the heart of why your nonprofit exists today – not yesterday or at its founding. It is too easy to get mired in the day-to-day operation of your organization without thinking about its current reason to be. Has your constituency changed? Are you providing services “by rote,” or because they are making a vital difference in the lives of those you serve?

Edgar Lee Masters in his *Spoon River Anthology* (1916) exposed the human tendency to become nearsighted through the voice of the deceased “Griffy the Cooper.” The poem is worth sharing.

The Cooper should know about tubs,
But I learned about life as well,
And you who loiter around these graves
Think you know life.
You think your eye sweeps about a wide horizon, perhaps,
In truth, you are only looking around the interior of your tub.
You cannot lift yourself to its rim
And see the outer world of things,
And at the same time see yourself.
You are submerged in the tub of yourself –
Taboos and rules and appearances,
Are the staves of your tub.
Break them and dispel the witchcraft
Of thinking your tub is life!
And that you know life!

Masters was referring to individuals, but his words speak to organizations, too. On at least an annual basis, you, as the leader of your nonprofit, should guide Board and staff members in reacting to and answering the question about your compelling reason(s) to exist and to engage others in supporting your work.

Is your mission fresh, current, compelling, and memorable? Has your nonprofit changed to respond to the present needs of your consumers? Would your organization's absence be felt by your consumers and society? In answering these questions, be specific. What you learn will help you better understand how to make your case for support from the standpoint of meeting the needs of your donors and prospects.

Issue Areas

A significant benefit of listing specific answers to the question of your nonprofit's current worth is that you will build a list of those attributes that make you distinctive and attractive to those whom you identify as your target audience members. The list will include what your organization provides that no other nonprofit offers as well as what you do better/less expensively/etc. than any other organization. Defining these issue areas with which you deal will help you determine whom should be interested in your organization as well as strengthen the messaging to your present supporters.

There are a number of ways these issue areas can be defined. One is, of course, the strategic planning process that reviews/confirms/changes the mission statement and assesses your effectiveness in delivering your services. Another way is to use the annual Board meeting/retreat/workshop to create your list. You may be surprised to learn that some of your Board members are unaware of what your nonprofit really does, and the session will help get all of them on the same (accurate) page in thinking and talking about the organization they jointly own.

The Internal Case Statement

Readers of this newsletter and the quarterly *Development Companion* will know that we advocate the creation of an internal resource document that defines who you are as an organization. Further, when the creative process includes a diverse group of people within your nonprofit, the final document will truly become the written embodiment of your organization.

It is in the internal case statement that the title's question is fully answered. The case fleshes out the marketing language for the audiences who are (or should be) interested in the organization. In particular, the nonprofit is described in ways that each audience member will come to understand, accept, appreciate, and support your mission. In other words, these individuals will be led to know how their needs are met by helping to meet the needs identified by your organization.

There are many pieces to an internal case statement, and we will happily provide an outline of contents. We believe strongly that this will be of tremendous benefit to your nonprofit. We have other materials, as well, that may be useful in creating a marketing message for your organization. For the case statement outline, send an email requesting it to brydon.dewitt@gmail.com. For other kinds of marketing help, use the same email address or call 804-364-0145.