

Musings on the Year that Was

By Brydon M. DeWitt, President

The great philosopher Yogi Berra (who also played baseball) observed that "You can see a lot by just looking." Yogi knew that we need to pay attention to the people and events around us to learn, to be inspired, to plan. He also was wise enough to see what did not work and to try to avoid making the same mistakes.

All of us in the nonprofit business should heed Yogi's advice. Too often, we get so involved in the work we are doing that we fail to take the time to stop, listen, and observe. These pauses in our frantic schedules are not only refreshing, but they are important for us and our organizations to move toward fulfilling our missions of service.

Each year provides examples, both good and bad, that can be useful as you think about what should be done in the future. In this issue, we will review some of these, ask some questions, reach some conclusions, and hope to stimulate thinking that will lead to more productive work at your nonprofit.

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

This is a fundamental question for Board and staff members to ask and specifically answer each and every year to make certain that your nonprofit is still worthwhile - *today* - not just when your organization was founded or even last year. Taking the time to stop, think, and give answers to that important question will help you determine:

- If your mission statement still describes why and what you do;
- The particular issues with which your nonprofit deals that are exclusive and/or better than others delivering similar services;
- The messages for your target audience members to help them remember why you are important to them.
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It's Not (Always) the Economy, Stupid!

Over the last few years, with some rebounding for nonprofits in 2013, we have heard plenty of stories about how bad or slow is the economy. Nonprofits that depend upon donations to fund vital programs from feeding the hungry to providing education for pre-schoolers have been tempted to wail and gnash teeth. Yet, we know that we cannot curl into a ball and hide from the real world. We have nonprofits to run and fund or we fail those who depend on us.

When you examine the research by Giving USA, it is clear that Americans should be given more credit than we tend to do. From 2003 – 2012, giving dipped slightly in 2008 and 2009, but increased every other year in that period. Total giving in 2012 reached \$316.23 billion, 79% from individuals.

The truth is that individuals continue to support nonprofits that have persisted in reminding their target audiences why the organization is necessary and meets their needs. If you have retreated from your marketing and fundraising efforts during 2013 because you were worried about how your message might be received – think again.

Stop and review your marketing/ communications and fundraising program in 2013. If you have been timid, unfocused on messaging for your target markets, or, possibly, not thought about markets and messaging, now is a great time to make an honest appraisal and create a more effective action plan for 2014.

You Can't Push a Rope

This cannot be attributed to Yogi, but he would likely agree with the wise person who made this observation. So, let's talk about Boards.

Nonprofit Board members are a much maligned bunch as a rule. They are not around every day, so it is easy to complain about what they are or are not doing. However, you may find it uncomfortable to learn that whatever you believe is wrong with your Board and its members, it is not usually the Board member's fault that he/she/they are not performing as you need them to do.

Building and maintaining a highly functioning and productive Board is hard work. To be successful, the CEO and chief development officer, along with the chair of the Board, must be purposeful in planning to engage each member of the Board on multiple levels. Some of the interactions with Board members can be:

- At least one phone call from the CEO and/or the Board chair to each member of the Board between quarterly or biannual meetings just to touch base and bring them up to date on what's occurring at your organization;
- Having at least one lunch or dinner meeting a year with each Board member. At this meeting, you can learn more about the member's real interest in your nonprofit,

whether or not he/she feels knowledge and skills are being well used, discuss any problem areas, and take seriously concerns and suggestions the member may have;

- Promptly get back to the member should additional information be necessary and/or to provide updates on the progress of the member's suggestion;
- Remember every birthday, anniversary, and achievement with a card or note.

The more you foster real ownership of the Board by its members, the more ownership of the organization by the Board will develop. This requires permitting Board members to understand what it means to be an owner of a nonprofit business and to create for themselves the goals and objectives to achieve for the Board to be a strong asset in helping the organization reach toward its mission.

Of course, at the root of your Board engagement issue may well be the manner by which the members were recruited. Entirely too often, Board candidates are asked to join at the last minute, as a favor to someone, or are appointed to represent a firm or business because the CEO couldn't accept the offer. Now would be an excellent time to review your recruiting process and your Board job description.

Some questions to ask as you ponder are:

- Is your mission statement current, memorable and compelling?
- Have Board members agreed to their job description?
- Is there a current strategic plan or has the Board set strategic objectives?
- Have you completed an analysis of the strengths of your Board members, their professions, and their market penetrations so that you can prioritize prospective members?
- Do you have a functioning Board Affairs or Board Governance Committee that can take responsibility and give leadership to the development of the Board?

There are no more important volunteers than members of your Board. To be successful long term, they must understand, accept, appreciate, and support your organization as well as serving as passionate ambassadors to the community. Even if you have a productive Board – and especially if you do not – this is a great time to reflect and plan for a stronger future.

Resolutions . . .

I know, I know, New Year's resolutions are made in haste, and then we repent at leisure. But, this is a wonderful time to think seriously about the many facets of your organization and how well each is functioning. Expanding your thinking into real conversations and discussions with staff members and Board members will not only help you improve, but your efforts will bring them together to analyze, plan, and act.