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Synthesis of Donor Interviews

San Francisco Exercise

June 12-13, 2009



Agenda

- Overall impressions
- Question-by-question report-out
- Overarching themes and observations
 - Are you willing to make any informed assertions, or wager any “grounded theories?”
- Suggestions for process improvements
- How might you use depth interviewing in the future?



Reflections on the Process

- What was your experience with the interviews?
 - **How similar or dissimilar were your interviewees?**
 - There was a wide range of perspectives from donor to donor
 - Some connected directly to the arts – usually either artists or arts managers
 - One of the over-arching similarities was that people really wanted to help others
 - Another similarity donors shared was that they were not used to being asked these questions; it was therapeutic for some
 - Overall giving is an important part of their lives, a manifestation of who they are
 - One donor noted that although he didn't like the project, mostly because he didn't get acknowledged for his contribution, he did it because of connection to community, one of his defining characteristics
 - **How thoughtful were the answers?**
 - Many shared personal stories all the way back to their childhood as a pathway to their giving
 - In response to \$10K question, one donor answered immediately that she would give to her college to endow a teaching position to counteract a negative experience while she was there to make sure this didn't happen to anyone else .
 - **Were there any emotional moments?**
 - One donor cried in the middle of the interview when she started talking about a performance of Romeo and Juliet, and what it is about theatre that she is so passionate about: "The way it changes me – the way I am different when I come back from a performance." It's what she wasn't saying that was making her eyes well up.
 - One donor noted she was the only person in her family in the position to participate in the arts and give to the arts. She spoke of the difficulties in being an Asian woman of small stature, and that all her giving focuses on exposing voices that have not been heard before, as each gift is a representation of her own personal experience.
 - "It's really interesting to hear myself talk about it, and reflect on it – this experience is how it's (the experience of giving) is how is this [giving] is more rewarding"



Q1: Personal passions

- Personal passions named include:
 - Health, seeking peace of mind, folk music (making and listening), arts and crafts, food and travel, playing tennis (sports), literature (general reading), coming back to arts later in life, cooking, environment, spirituality (world peace), children and arts education, immigration advocacy, youth (e.g., development & leadership), social justice (e.g., empowerment of individuals in community, race relations, especially in university setting, queer community), learning, volunteering, sense of adventure, family
- Several donors mentioned how world travel influenced the development of their passions
- One donor curates giving to KIVA to specific projects in Eastern Europe and women's issues, as it reflects her personal experience
- Anything unusual?
 - Coming into an art practice later in life
 - Three donors declined to separate "work" from "passion" considering their work to be their passion
 - Social networking, including online but not kept to that (active social life)
 - One donor noted that all her passions were rolled into one organization - sense of community, the combination of food and music, welcoming attitude, and being introduced to great musicians (if all organizations could grab people in that way)
- How much arts vs. other interests?



Q2: How do you express yourself creatively?

- Many donors said they were not at all creative, however after some discussion, it came out that many of their activities are grounded in creative pursuits. More so they saw themselves as promoters of creativity. because people associate creativity with whether or not they are “artists.”
 - After probing, one donor noted they are creative in cooking.
- Artists refused to say they were creative in anything other than their discipline, whereas arts managers refused to say they were creative at all.
- One donor felt strongly that her creativity was in being an audience member: “Everyone needs an audience and I am a very good audience member.” She went on to say that the event depends upon her and other audience members too; the audience is vital to this process. Being part of the audience is having to be intelligent, and open.
 - Audiences are smart and seeking an experience. We need attend to this desire.
- There is a clear alignment of creative expression and giving.
 - One donor spends five minutes every morning doing a mantra, and the language they used to described this practice was the same way in which they talked about their giving.
 - Many donors were artists themselves, volunteering and giving to other artists. They want to help people working as artists, as they know how much the struggle to make art can be.
 - Giving as a continual part of the artistic process as artists reach to other artists for giving



Q3: Affinities with groups, associations: Why are they important to you?

- With many of the donors, having a strong personal connection inspired much of the associations and giving.
- One donor supported the World Harmony Fund (promoting peace) which was connected to global citizenship “Good people focus on making the world a better place.”
- Some association/affinities included:
 - One donor had an affinity with causes related to breast cancer in connection to personal relationships people who have suffered.
 - Giving and associations with mothers and children, families, and religious affiliation
 - Being part of the start of something - an initiator
 - Personal relationships
 - Another donor gave to friends for their cat’s surgery, because it was her friend. It was about extreme loyalty (“I will support whatever they need me to do”).
 - Another donor supports causes that connect to iconoclast ideas that steer away with monotony or status quo. He liked being part of under the radar, underdog or rebel organizations.
- One donor has been giving through a family fund, and generally gives out of obligation. In the case of the matching grant, she was so excited about giving to a smaller theatre, talking about it as if it were her child because she created a close bond and personal connection.
- It is interesting to note that one donor wanted to associate with larger organization, but didn’t feel welcome and didn’t feel like he had access, that it was “too cool” for him (big high “cool” wall).
 - There is a mistrust of giving to larger organizations, where money just gets sucked into the organization, noting the “sludge” factor.



Q4: Core values

- Are there any convictions, beliefs, or principles that you have as a person that connect your various activities, or that explain why you do what you do? (is there something that ties this all together for you; what is the resonance for you; underline word connect as it is that word that stimulates the conversation; there is so much weight to these words and can potentially move the conversation in a way that moves away from the focus of the conversation. What do you stand for?
 - This question was very telling and useful in getting to understand donors' motivations. Often answers to this question were peppered throughout the interview
 - Many donors said something to the effect of "I want as a human being to do something good." Wanting to make the world a better place. They want to be a good citizen but don't know how to "unpack" the values behind these altruistic motivations.
 - Some other values include:
 - "I'm a greatly curious person." Satisfying curiosity – being open to new ideas
 - Youth focused – prefer to do good by supporting programs around education and youth programs
 - "I like other people to express themselves in any way possible." Desire to facilitate human expression.
 - Several donors said their values were about being a creative person and so support arts because they are inclusive
 - Personal relationship - support small groups because more likely to build personal relationships
 - Emotional connection to arts project as opposed to sense of responsibility in giving to social programs like The Boy's and Girl's Club, etc. "To give to the arts is a guilty programs."
 - Some donors launched into life stories in answer to this question, a key indicator that their life experience, especially how they were brought up, family and childhood experience.
 - "I try to have integrity in practiced form of diversity." Interested in pluralism and projects that bring people together (dialogue)
 - Providing opportunity for people who have not have it
 - "Politics don't work, religion too eclectic, the arts may be the parachute that can contain us all."
 - The magical moment, something that challenges you – like in flamenco – that 'duende.' "Seeing or hearing something I recognize that is remarkable in some ways that I attach myself to and there are so many things that do not."



Q5: Breadth or focus of financial support

- How broad or focused are your donations? Can you give me some examples of different causes that you support financially?
 - There was a variability among donors' giving patterns. Many focus their gifts the arts primarily, but sometimes donate "scattershot" to other organizations.
 - One donor said that with the economic downturn they are more focused on smaller organizations. There is a sense of urgency - the fear of live performance disappearing.
 - Many felt maintaining the live performance experience is tremendously important
 - "Focus on small, fragile and local."
 - There is a recycling nature to giving (e.g., artists giving to artists)
 - "A hand goes, a hand comes."
 - Many donors involved in arts organizations themselves gave unrestricted gifts, knowing that that would be more helpful to the organization



Q6: Gift that made you especially proud

- Can you give me an example of a contribution that you made over the past several years that you are especially proud of – a gift that was especially meaningful to you?
 - This was a hard question to answer for many as they could not distinguish between their gifts and had a hard time choosing just one
 - Some donors felt that the contributions that related to a sense of risk (e.g., anything could happen with a live performance, the spontaneity of that moment) were the most meaningful
 - One donor was proud of a gift for humanitarian effort
 - It was interesting that some donors were confused about the meaning of “meaningful” - did this mean a large gift or “meaningful” in an emotional sense?
 - One donor said “It doesn’t matter, it’s not supposed to be meaningful to me... [it’s supposed to be meaningful to the organization].”
 - Another donor said that supporting himself (as the artist) in a project was the most meaningful as it also engages other people
 - This project (FFA) was the most meaningful gift; one donor said it “opened my eyes to the arts.”
 - One donor said it was the personal connection involved, the organization /project itself and the larger cause (e.g., AIDs Ride)
 - Another donor gave for the organization to install solar panels, which allowed her to accomplish two value systems - giving to the arts and supporting environmental causes.



Q7: The \$10K Question

- If you had \$10,000 to give to some nonprofit cause or project tomorrow, what would you choose to support? Why?
 - Many donors wanted to split up the gift. It was hard to choose just one project.
 - One donor said they would look for where the money was most needed, and would more likely to give to social causes like homelessness or health causes, or youth
 - Another donor said to a small organization for greater impact
 - “I would give it to eradicate an organization’s debt.”
 - One donor said they would commission something that hadn’t been done (someone in the arts)
 - Another donor was concerned about efficiency - where it would make the most impact
 - Some noted they would need advise in how to spend
 - The \$10,000 is more money to some than to others
 - Most donors noted that their answer would change if the amount would be greater.



Q8: Desired Level of Control

- Would you say that your contributions are motivated by a general desire to support organizations or causes that are important to you, or out of a desire to support specific projects or activities that you feel are particularly worthwhile? Why? (Do you find yourself to be generally inclined to give, or do you need to be convinced to give to a specific project? And if so, what would it take you to give to something specific?)
 - Many donors were confused that there was a distinction between organizations and projects; to many of them the organization is the project.
 - Some were interested in specific projects because they wanted to know where their money was going, to have a sense of control
 - Others were not at all interested in having control, and were just happy to know their gift was given and being used.
 - For some, the projects aligned with their higher order values, and the organization has high level artistic quality events/shows



Q9: Personal Involvement

- How much personal involvement do you like to have with the organizations you support? How do you like to be involved? Can you give me some examples?
 - Each individual differed in response to this. Some examples include:
 - “Doesn’t really matter. I need some information but don’t need to be coddled.”
 - “It allows me to use my contacts and use my experience beyond my dollars.”
 - Although were giving to specific projects, they didn’t need to be directly involved.
 - One donor said in response to questions about his FFA donation, “If he had said to me, I could really use your help, I would have.”
 - Many liked the potential volunteer aspect, if asked by the organization. “It’s kind of nice to be invited to occasions where you won’t be asked for money.”
 - Organizations should think about utilizing Customer Relationship Management – talk to donors more than just soliciting them for money - find out what is important to them.



Q10: Accountability

- How are you assured that your contributions are well used? Do you trust arts groups to use the funds wisely, or do you like to have some proof or evidence that your contributions were well-spent?
 - **Probe: Are you satisfied with the level of accountability that your beneficiaries provide you?**
 - Most donors are extremely loyal and trusting: “Blindly I go. I never ask for it.” But many of these donors are personally involved with the organizations or other arts organizations. They’ve suffered the “glossary of accountability” and so understand the difficulties of providing specific metrics, choosing rather to trust, just as they would have their donors trust them.
 - Although some of the non-artist donors also trusted “blindly,” they wouldn’t mind knowing if offered the opportunity
 - Some noted that accountability is built into the environment of this specific grant initiative.
 - Some donors require information up front and then don’t want to hear anything after that. Others want to know what is happening, but not on an everyday basis.
 - “I know when I go and see the artistic product – I’ll be the judge of that.”
 - “I like to be kept up to date; even once a year is enough.”
 - **Probe: What could be done to improve this?**
 - One donor would love a donor-specific newsletter, instead of a general newsletter. They want to stay connected.
 - Make sure to acknowledge donations!
 - When you solicit, you should review what you have accomplished that past year.



FFA Q11: What attracted you to this project?

- Many donors felt it was the artists themselves that were doing the projects; they trust them.
- One donor said the combination of the artist and organization made it a “given” to give.
- Another donor noted it was the combination of subject matter and organization that pulled them in.
 - “I knew he would portray Oakland in a way that would make me proud to be a resident of Oakland.”
- One donor said it was affinity for where the artist was in their career
 - “I would’ve wanted their support [when I was at this place].”
- Another donor wanted to support the community in which the project was taking place and was interested in the impact on the community.



FFA Q12: Awareness/influence of match

- For most, if not all, the match was very important as it was the first time this organization participated in something like this. For others said they like giving to matches as it gave leverage, and one donor said that it gave the artist credibility, whereas another who was an artist herself, felt it was an opportunity for reciprocity.
- Many donors were attracted to giving in the first place because of the match.
- One board member wanted to prove to the organization that they could do the match.
- Most donors were aware of the match, but didn't care and would've given anyway.
- One donor said they felt like a "shareholder" in a company.
- Not all donors were aware of the match; one donor was oblivious and didn't like that project, or that his gift was used to support it.
- The match influenced the timing of the gift. "I gave a little more because of the match."



FFA Q13: Personal involvement

- For many, their involvement was in attending the performance or exhibit, and donation itself.
- Some are on the board of the organization, while others volunteered at the event.
- One donor said they were solicited for feedback.
- Another donor said they were asked to be part of the project itself.



FFA Q14: Outcome/assessment/satisfaction

- Some comments included:
 - "Job well done."
 - Satisfaction that there the project was actually completed
 - "I'm satisfied that I helped," but the artist did all the work.
- Some donors were lukewarm on the actual project, but would absolutely give again. The outcome of the artwork not as important as completing the work overall.
- Some donors didn't know the outcome, as the project has not yet been completed.



FFA Q14: Outcome/assessment/satisfaction

- Probe: *Would you make the same gift again?*
 - All donors, whether or not they liked the product, felt the gift was worthwhile. This indicates a more sophisticated donor group, as they were willing to experience something more risky, and were tolerant for a wide range of outcomes.
 - “Yes, yes, [I would make the gift again] unless you did something stupid.”
- Probe: *If so, would you do anything differently?*
- Probe: *What would have made your experience as a donor even richer and more rewarding?*
 - To have a way to share this experience with others...the project was ephemeral.
 - One donor would've liked to have been engaged more often throughout the development of this work - a window into the project, like an open rehearsal (e.g., Cal Shakes)



Overarching Ideas

- Talking to donors allows for them to give back and have a deeper sense of connection and giving then just writing a check.
 - "It's really interesting to hear myself talk about it, and reflect on it - this experience is how it's (the experience of giving) is how is this is more rewarding."
- The goal is to create and connect to community.
 - Many passions are connected to community; how we want to connect to and define community. People are diverse, not narrow in thinking.
- There is a sense of discovery and wanting to be taken somewhere (outside of their known comfort zone or familiar environment). Donors are open and engaged in many things, especially in the arts, and are vulnerable to and interested in a new experience.
- There is a perception that your gift goes farther in a smaller organization where you can see the impact.
 - "Little for the big ones, big for the little ones."
- There is a symbiosis between financial and non-financial involvement. For some, giving is an introduction to being involved in the organization beyond dollars.
- There is a sense of fulfillment for many donors just in the act of giving.
- Giving is such a personal thing, and the arts are so intangible. It is difficult to pinpoint what is going to connect to people. As small organizations, cultivating that connection and message is a struggle, but extremely important to successful fundraising.



Potential Uses of Depth Interviewing in the Future

- Understanding diversity of donors' passions can be a way of drawing people into organizations. Focus on selling a broader life experience, not just an arts event or program.
- Note that donating is a dual experience on both ends, a co-experience between arts organization and donor.
 - One potential message to donors: "Be an active creator. You can be a part of this creation."
 - Ensure the people (e.g., development staff) doing the asking understand this experience of connection.
- Message about value on different levels: give people something to relate to, give them the "hook" that draws them in. Be authentic, real and open.
- Tap into different value systems outside of the arts. Often we sell the art, when sometimes people are buying something completely different
- Find out what is important to the donor and then shape the ask based on what you find out.
- Utilize boards to interview donors to gather information and bring it back to you.
 - Whittle this exercise to a board-oriented exercise
 - Make interviewing a part of the board orientation process, both donors and audience members
 - Instruct them that it's not about the ask this time, but about what they care about.



Potential Uses of Depth Interviewing in the Future

- Provide a way for donors to be reminded of donation – documentation, podcasts, etc.
- Give donors creative credit the way we give audiences intellectual credit. Involve them in the process (curated giving).
- Continue the interactive exercise among small arts groups, working with each other on an ongoing basis to help out and create synergies between organizations, artists and projects.
 - Create a vehicle to share best practices, but also information that you find in your own efforts
 - Can we work together to expand the donor pool?
- Review letters and emails to donors, and review what you learned here. Use this information to try and deepen the cultivation process and materials you provide. Ask yourself:
 - Am I messaging about value?
 - How many layers of values am I messaging about?
 - Can I personalize the communication/ask based on what I might know about the donor?
- Utilize this interview tool to think about how to dismantle where your “pitch” is too broad and make it more specific where you can.