



TCFN MONOGRAPH RAISING VISIBILITY – PROCEED WITH CAUTION

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Conventional wisdom observes that community foundations should do everything possible to achieve increased visibility. Who can or should argue with that contention?

And yet, community foundations that seek greater visibility would be well advised – as the highway warning signs note – to proceed with caution. The concept of increased visibility is a slippery notion that begs for close scrutiny and even a measure of skepticism.

More than 20 years ago the Arizona Community Foundation commissioned a brief and somewhat amateurish study to assess public awareness of our institution. Since we had been in existence for only six years, the results were almost predictably dismal: a scant 3% of those surveyed had ever heard of us. We were almost invisible.

Then in 2004 a more scientific study by a well-established research firm produced an interesting two-tier response. When asked if they knew about community foundations (the so-called “unaided question”), only 3% of the respondents identified the Arizona Community Foundation by name. However, when asked specifically if they were aware of the Arizona Community Foundation (the so-called “aided question”), the figure jumped to 11%.

Was this bad news? Good news? Or no news at all?

No matter how one interpreted the results, it seemed clear that the Arizona Community Foundation still was not exactly jumping off the visibility charts. To the frustration of our board, despite our efforts to increase newspaper coverage about the foundation, despite radio advertisements, despite all of our work, public awareness of us remained essentially unchanged. We still were what some called “the best kept secret in Arizona.”

But consider these achievements: during the course of the same two decades between these studies, the Foundation’s assets increased from \$2.5 million to \$400 million; the funds it managed leaped from 25 to 750; annual grants skyrocketed from \$100,000 to almost \$20 million; and the number of community initiatives grew from zero to nearly a dozen.

The message seemed clear. Although we had not raised widespread public awareness of the foundation, our visibility had increased among persons of high net worth, key donors, professional advisors, important community leaders and in what euphemistically may be called “circles of influence.”

Do we still yearn for more public attention? Of course. We experience every emotion from frustration to rage when the media fail to take note of our many virtues. But we no longer stay awake at night wondering why so many people don't know who we are.

Is there room for improvement? Absolutely. There always is. Yet, like Sisyphus, those committed to achieving greater visibility will forever be pushing a large rock up-hill. What we have learned is that one's definition of visibility, one's assumptions about visibility and one's expectations of visibility – properly framed -- can do wonders to reduce that sense of eternal inadequacy.

There can be little argument about the critical nature of being visible to persons of high net worth, major donors, professional advisors, community leaders and even certain grant recipients. This kind of targeting does not just help; it is a pre-condition for survival. On a five-point scale, respondents to the recent TCFN survey on visibility awarded "helping community foundations become better known and understood by the people and organizations that are important to their success" a 4.5.

Nonetheless, it's a different story when it comes to raising visibility among the general public, the "man on the street," the 90+ per cent of the people whom, according to the Arizona Community Foundation's survey, we haven't managed to reach. Here there is room for some healthy skepticism aimed at the underlying assumptions.

Again, conventional wisdom claims a connection between having a higher community profile and securing more assets. However, the problem with conventional wisdom is that there is very little empirical evidence to support that connection. Conventional wisdom would have us believe that if community foundations became a household word, they would also become a household utility. To repeat, there is no evidence to support the notion that romance leads to marriage.

Conventional wisdom says that if we can just get our name in the newspaper, spend enough on advertising, sponsor enough big-name events and find the catchy little jingle that arouses a joyful "a-ha" from prospective donors, we can coast to fame and fortune. And yet I painfully recall the occasion when we spent a considerable amount of time and money creating a special insert for the Sunday edition of our local newspaper, only to have it yield a single telephone call – a request for a grant application!

So why do community foundations continue to chase the elusive quarry of widespread public visibility? Probably for several reasons:

- Fund raising is a tough business. Recruiting donors to a community foundation is a never-ending challenge, not nearly as straightforward as soliciting for a university, a symphony or a hospital. It's part of human nature to look for a magic bullet to make the task less daunting, and widespread visibility for some people is that bullet.

- Defining ourselves is equally challenging. It can be difficult and time-consuming to explain concisely and precisely just what a community foundation is. Proposals to prospective donors to use the community foundation as a vehicle for giving generally aren't especially sexy or rooted in emotional appeal. So, rather than take the time required to build trust and understanding, it often is far more tempting –figuratively speaking – to drop thousands of leaflets from a balloon; to solve our definitional agony by spewing forth a sea of newsprint.
- We're also the victims of conditioning by a world in which mass communication has convinced us that publicity is a good thing – an end in itself. If you have a great product, tell the world about it, and they'll buy more of it. "Branding" and promotion are key elements in the natural order of humankind.
- Sometimes we just don't know what else to do. Widespread public visibility becomes our default mechanism when we can't think of other ways to achieve our goals. We swerve and dodge away from the dirty business of asking people for money by insisting that all solicitation be preceded by a general awareness campaign, and this practice of avoidance can become a high art form. After all, what constitutes enough visibility? How far must your name be broadcast before you begin closing in on donors?

A group of us have been wrestling for the past two years with the subject of increasing the visibility of community foundations. In the process, they/we have developed some wonderful new materials to aid the cause. So, before I am accused of heresy and disenfranchised by my colleagues, let me offer some closing thoughts on the subject.

- The raising of visibility – especially if one is clear about one's audience – *is* important, desirable and even necessary.
- Even when my pronouncements sound most absolute, I always am acutely aware that community foundations operate within diverse environments and value systems. It is never a matter of "one size fits all."
- Because we operate as a kind of public trust, we have the obligation to be both transparent and accountable. It is essential that we tell the community what we are doing and let the donors know how we are using their money.
- Perhaps the most useful way to approach the subject of community foundation visibility is to remember that whatever methods we employ, they always are the means to a greater end, and that end is the building of trusted relationships between donors and the community foundations they use as instruments for their generosity.

In the final analysis, the test of a community foundation's worth is not how loudly and widely it trumpets its messages but rather how well it delivers on its core promises: to promote philanthropy, to connect donors' passions to the long-term work of thoughtful giving, and to use all of its resources in the building of a strong, caring and just community.