Sharing The Dream: Fundraising Lessons from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

By Griet Dehandschutter

This article is based on a presentation by Griet Dehandschutter, Principal of Dehandschutter & Associates, given at the 2013 Annual Dutch Museum Conference on Cross Connections and Collaborations.

(allowance for image use pending from Martin Luther King Jr.’s estate manager)

2013 marked the 50 year anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr’s famous March on Washington and “I Have a Dream” speech. He is remembered for his work in the civil rights movement, but there is a lot that one can learn from him from a fundraising perspective as well. Here are ten crucial elements that museums and other nonprofits can take away from his life’s work.

1. Dr. King created a community, centered on a common dream and shared vision.
2. He articulated the dream shared by millions of people. He brought these people together through a shared vision and shared goals.
3. He dared to think “big and bold”.
4. He gave the dream a face.
5. Every dream starts with one person. It all starts with leadership.
6. He brought joy and deep passion to everything he did.
7. He gave volunteers an opportunity to take action. He gave them a chance to have meaningful engagement within the movement.
8. He showed how to create a movement, rather than a static community, using every step as momentum and leverage to go further on his journey.
9. He was a change agent. He was not afraid to challenge the status quo and dare to do new things.
10. The picture above was deliberately chosen because we live in such a visual world. In fundraising, images are also essential. Too often, visuals are insufficiently used to share the message.

Create a Community around a Shared Dream

King created a community around a shared dream. He managed to articulate the dreams of millions of people. So ask yourself, is your organization correctly articulating the dreams of your potential donors? Defining the common dream is the starting point for any successful nonprofit. It is about the common goals, not just the museum’s goal. This represents a paradigm shift, taking into account the donors’ goals and viewpoints. Shifting to this view makes asking for money much less painful, because you are no longer simply asking for money. Rather, you are working together to realize something meaningful within the community. In an increasingly mobile and global world, people are yearning more than ever to feel connected, to have that “home base”. People want to feel as though they belong, and gathering around a shared goal does just that. A museum engaging with its donors in a meaningful and impactful way can further their own organization while bringing fulfillment to donors and building sustainable, long-lasting bonds with them.

What do you need to create this community? Museums have a built in advantage of their own physical gathering space, as well as interested people self-identifying by visiting the museum. However, museums should not shy away from additional opportunities to gather outside of their own space.

Museums should also take this cue to remember that all actions and communications from the organization should start from the viewpoint of a potential donor. Find the commonalities with potential donors, and break them down into different activities that engage different people best.

Think Big and Bold

King always thought big and bold, which was vital in furthering the civil rights movement. In our dynamic and fast paced world, “good is not good enough\(^1\)”, as stated in an article in the Stanford Social Innovation Review. Organizations cannot get by on being simply “good”; rather you can take a cue from King and think big and bold. This does not mean that everything you do

must be large in size, but it must be large in terms of creativity. In addition to promoting specific exhibits individually, promote the museum as a whole. Take that common dream and position yourself within the whole nonprofit market. Do not be afraid to go bigger and bolder.

If the ‘why’ of the organization is big enough, being emotional, strong, and relevant enough, more people will want to associate with said idea, joining the organization. Too many organizations have ideas that are not unique, and they use a transactional perspective instead of aspirational. Is your story unique and intriguing? Museums no longer compete only with other museums; they compete with the entire world. If they want to entertain their visitors, they are competing with the Kardashians. If they want to teach history, they are competing with The History Channel and documentaries. It goes far beyond the city and country where a museum is based.

By creating a strong narrative, you enable everyone to share your organization’s story. Staff, trustees, telephone operations, front office people, sales people, etc. all need basic knowledge of the organization and the story to build and share with others.

**Give the Dream a Face**

Especially in the Netherlands, directors often keep a low profile, grounded in their earlier history as civil servants. However, people give to people; they want to see a dynamic manager steering the organization.

Putting a face to an organization allows people to recognize it as more real, not just an abstract idea. Those involved with a museum can help people put a face to the organization and have their true mission shine.

**A Dream Starts with Leadership**

The job of a fundraiser is to inspire, organize, and get others engaged, not just to ask for money. There must be strong communication and coordination within the entire organization. Starting from the inside and working your way outwards, create both leverage and a momentum that will fuel your fundraising efforts. When board members and staff share responsibility for fundraising, their perspectives often reflect the perspectives of donors. People are also more likely to give to people that give themselves. If your board members donate, others are likely to follow suit. Sharing leadership with many people is absolutely essential to building long term donor relationships. Directors and members of the management team should focus on acting as leaders, with a responsibility to inspire others, not just supervisors.

**Be Joyful and Passionate**

Leadership and staff should display deep passion and joyfulness. Success breeds success. When people see how highly esteemed those associated with a museum believe the museum to be, they are more likely to join in. This way, rather than pressuring donors, you engage them, and rather than persuading them, you inspire them to join you.
Give Volunteers an Opportunity to Take Action

King gave people the chance to take action alongside him, to be fully involved in the movement. Similarly, museums should not focus just on the money side, but also on creating fun and educational opportunities for people to get involved. Often museums use only professionals to give guided tours, yet giving volunteers the opportunity to do so engages them with the museum in a meaningful way. People yearn for a sense of belonging; involving them further can fulfill this yearning. Many ways exist for friends, volunteers, and donors to engage more deeply.

Use Momentum and Leverage to Go Further

Momentum and leverage are essential to successful fundraising efforts. People give to people who give themselves. As the board gives to the museum, more and more people will contribute as well. It is important to be prepared for such success. Believe in your aspirations for your organization, as well as the organization itself. Gaining credibility in the community takes time, money and effort. But when a campaign is strongly backed and well planned, success is sure to come.

Be a Change Agent, Dare to Do New Things

It takes courage to start the change process. No matter how hard you try, success will not happen overnight, but keep a positive attitude. A professional fundraising startup is like investing in the construction of a train station. You have to invest upfront in the basic building blocks. Consider telling your museum’s story, training your board, staff, and volunteers; and establishing the back office infrastructure needed. Be prepared for the train to leave. As you gain momentum, you must be ready to move fast forward. Don’t chase the train!

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