



## ***A Series on Engagement, Part II:***

### ***It's Still Not About You: The "How" of Community Engagement***

November 2012

Last month we began a series on community engagement - the "long-term strategy to build community ownership, participation, relationships, and support for your organization." ([Doug Borwick, \*Engaging Matters\*](#)). We're exploring this subject because we recently came across an article that resonated with us - particularly now as funders are looking for much broader impact than they have in the past. In [Giving Community a Meaningful Voice](#), Dr. Candace Tangorra Matelic and her fellow authors state that "to become relevant in our communities, the traditional activities of collecting, preserving, researching, and exhibiting are no longer adequate. Our organizations are now challenged to justify our existence and support in terms of our public service value, or the positive contribution we make to our communities." While important, preserving important buildings, conserving great objects, developing outstanding exhibitions, landmarking districts, are activities that focus internally. Funders are looking for external focus, so we need to demonstrate how these activities serve the public. That takes being an organization that is more relevant in the community, which requires engaging them.

I can hear the groans now. But remember, this isn't a necessary evil - it's a way to transform your organization by learning more about whom you serve, how you can serve them better, and what is meaningful to those who have never set foot in your door. You'll be making preservation an integral part of your community, and perhaps changing the attitude towards preservation along the way. Libraries are about information access, not books. What can preservation and conservation be beyond "saving stuff?"

It starts by introducing yourself to those who may not know you. Connect with your community leaders - elected officials, corporate folks, and directors of non-cultural organizations - by reaching out to them individually. That means no blanket e-mails or form letters. Be authentic - let them know you want to work with them to determine community needs and are asking how you can play a role in developing a collective plan to meet those needs.

We're not saying don't contact other cultural organizations. You can work with other museums, performing arts centers, theaters, and dance and music companies to engage the community. Carnegie Hall has done this with great success - their themed festivals are not just concerts, but include lectures, exhibitions, films, dance performances, and family programs presented by organizations throughout New York. Through collaboration they've created a citywide celebration of a particular culture - and engaged much more of the community than they could within their own halls.

Lastly, keep in mind that this is much more than the isolated event. You can't have a street fair, conservation lab tour, or other one-time event and say you've engaged the community. Nor can involve those in your inner circle through surveys or outreach programs and say you've done so (that's audience development). The community is everyone, and to truly engage you have to develop a long-term relationship with those who are not part of your world. That takes more than one interaction.

For a few examples: *New Roles for Small Museums*

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