

Conference Centers in the Community

By Ralph Townsend

The relationships a conference center has with its surrounding community are key to its long term success. The community is not only a potential source of business but also can become a significant ally (or a significant enemy) when local issues such as land use and taxation arise. Building community relationships takes time and effort, but it is not a hard thing to do. Refer to the Key Steps.

As nonprofit conference center directors, we are continuously searching for ways to increase our donor base, our user days, and our revenue sources. We also sometimes have a tendency to live in the isolated bubble of our conference center world, from which it is difficult to look beyond our current resources. We are either caught up in the operations of our facilities, uncomfortable outside of our bubble, or unsure of where to start.

Community outreach is as easy as making new friends. Know yourself, go places, be open to new ideas, reach out to others, and don't expect to meet your best friend right away. Believe in your mission, give things a chance, and good things will happen.

UNDERSTAND YOUR STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

The first thing to do is to understand your strengths and weaknesses, as well as those of

Key Steps in building Community Relations...

- **UNDERSTAND YOUR STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES, BOTH YOUR OWN AND THOSE OF YOUR CONFERENCE CENTER**
- **DEFINE YOUR MESSAGES**
- **GET YOUR MESSAGES OUT**
- **BE OPEN TO NEW IDEAS AND DON'T ALWAYS LOOK AT THE BOTTOM LINE**
- **REACH AS MANY DIFFERENT PEOPLE IN AS MANY DIFFERENT SETTINGS AS POSSIBLE**
- **JOIN AN ORGANIZATION**
- **GET OUT, GO PLACES, TRY NEW THINGS, MEET PEOPLE**

your conference center. Which of your organizational strengths will appeal most to potential donors or foundations? What will your message be to these potential donors? How will you meet these potential donors to get your message out? You must embrace the fact that people see you and your conference center as one. You are the face of your organization, and your actions reflect directly on the conference center - and vice versa.

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Once you understand your message, where do you start? Community building and outreach are two things that I have learned to do with some success over the years. To illustrate my methods, I'd like to tell you about my first fourteen months as Executive Director of the La Foret Conference & Retreat Center in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

I spent my first four months learning about the operations and staff of La Foret and, most importantly, understanding our mission, our strengths, our weaknesses and our existing community relationships. Like many nonprofit conference centers, our community consisted of our owner churches and other user groups. Our neighbors, the nonprofit community in Colorado Springs, and most potential donors had no clue who or what we were. I knew that if La Foret was going to succeed, we would need to evolve to include many more people and organizations in our community, but how would I appeal to others?

Some camps or conference centers have an inherently broad appeal to a large base. Prior to coming to La Foret, I was director of a special needs camp for at-risk youth. This mission lent itself easily to potential donors and foundations. At La Foret we have spent 60 years providing a special spiritual retreat for United Church of Christ and Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) youth, adults and families. While La Foret has made a profound difference in the lives of countless people; this unfortunately does not win the hearts or pocketbooks of most foundations and donors. What La Foret does have is history, and a lot of it. Two of our buildings are on the National Register of Historic Places, and our facility was originally the summer retreat of one the wealthiest and most prominent women in Colorado Springs in the first half of the twentieth century, Alice Bemis Taylor.

DEFINE YOUR MESSAGES

The next step after determining your strengths and weaknesses is to define

your messages. It is important to recognize that you might have multiple messages depending upon your audience. Everyone has a different experience at your conference center. The person who grew up at La Foret is going to have different experiences and respond to a different message than the adult who comes for a day retreat or who is a major donor from your community. Your message must be flexible enough to reach the individual without compromising your mission. My message to our churches and those who grew up at La Foret is that we are making La Foret a better place and ensuring its future by sharing it with others. My message to the others is that we are working to become a community partner and looking to work with other organizations to better serve the community and share our historic buildings.

GETTING YOUR MESSAGE OUT

The next challenge is getting your message out. Again you must know your strengths. I am most comfortable one-on-one or in small groups, so I try to attend events or have meetings that play to these strengths. A year ago I attended my first event as ED of La Foret. It was a nonprofit networking day in Colorado Springs, with over 400 people attending. (I hear you saying that this is not exactly a small group, which is true, but we were seated for lunch at tables of ten.) The two people sitting next to me were from a day nursery, a leading nonprofit organization which was founded by our original owner, Mrs. Taylor. We have since developed a great relationship with that organization and run joint programs throughout the year. I also made friends with the Executive Director of the host organization for the event, The Center for Nonprofit Excellence. Two months later we co-hosted a wine and cheese reception which drew over 50 people. At this year's networking day, the director of the Center was interviewed on TV news, and the first thing she mentioned was La Foret. She has become one of our biggest marketing tools – whenever we see her, she introduces people to us and tells them what a wonderful place we are.

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At the same networking event, I also had the opportunity during breaks to introduce myself to the directors of the five leading foundations in our area. At subsequent events I made a point of saying hello, and I have now developed enough of a relationship with each foundation executive that I can call or e-mail whenever I have questions. The next step, of course, will be writing the grant requests, but I believe that you are much more likely to receive a grant if the foundation already knows who you and your organization are and what you stand for.

Another great way to start is to look at your past to see if you have any connections to other organizations or people. The Fine Arts Center of Colorado Springs also was started by Alice Bemis Taylor, so even prior to my start date as ED, I contacted them to see if they had any interest in collaborating. Today we run a joint day camp and other programs where we can boast having fine arts instructors for our camping programs. We have a section in all of the Fine Arts Center brochures, which are mailed to over 10,000 people annually, and they sent actors from their production of the Pirates of Penzance to perform for free at our wine and cheese reception.

I have also made friends with the director of development of the Fine Arts Center. Their largest donor, who is also the largest donor in our area, owns a home designed by the architect who designed our historic chapel, John Gaw Meem. While I knew that she could be a potential large supporter, I was not sure how to make the initial contact. By chance one day, I was in a coffee shop and my development director friend from the Fine Arts Center came in the door with the donor and walked over and introduced her to me. Aligning your organization with other community leading organizations not only strengthens your stature in the community and opens many other doors, but also allows you to take advantage of serendipitous occasions when they arise.

BE OPEN TO NEW IDEAS AND DON'T ALWAYS LOOK AT THE BOTTOM LINE.

The local fire department has hosted a community Easter Egg Hunt at various locations in the Black Forest through the years. I offered our grounds for the event last year, and it was a success, which gave us great exposure and helped to build friendships in the local community. From the Easter egg hunt we moved to the Halloween community Trick-or-Treat, again partnering with the Fire Department and other community organizations. We had over 700 people attend and because of our friendship with the Fire department, they not only handled the traffic but also had an ambulance on site and got the sheriff to station a car at our entrance and handle traffic there.

These community events help us in many ways. First, we gain positive exposure - for years the locals have been driving by our entrance and wondering what La Foret was and what we did. We now have connected La Foret in the community with a positive image and event. Second, we have developed positive relationships with the fire department and the local sheriff. If we have any problems, we know that we can count on their support. Third, these events offer great opportunities to market our other programs to the local community. Each child who came to the Easter Egg Hunt or Trick-or-Treat got a Day Camp brochure. Every adult was treated as a potential client, and we had information available on nonprofit retreats and meetings, as well as about weddings at La Foret.

Another great way of expanding into the community is through the United Way Volunteer Center. You do not have to receive funding from them to participate in the volunteer program. Our United Way happened to be running their "Care to Share" volunteer day exactly at the time we needed help for our community Trick-or-Treat. We were able to get 150 volunteers over two days from local businesses to help put together our event. Not only were the volunteers vital in organizing our event, but

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again we had a chance to show off La Foret to 150 people who previously didn't even know we existed. With two of the companies that participated (Federal Express and USBank), I believe we now have an opportunity to receive some funding.

REACH AS MANY DIFFERENT PEOPLE IN AS MANY DIFFERENT SETTINGS AS POSSIBLE

My goal is to reach as many different people in as many different settings as possible, knowing that we are not the right place for everyone. But at the same time you do not want to discount anyone as a potential client or donor. I have met people in coffee shops, grocery stores, and other places. Along these lines, we are hosting a Chamber of Commerce Networking Night. My main goal isn't to target the attending companies as clients, but many of the attendees are also members of churches or other community organizations that could use La Foret. They could also have children that may be looking for a day camp. Or they may go back to their company and say that La Foret is a great place and the company should volunteer there or give us financial support.

JOIN AN ORGANIZATION

Another great thing to do is join an organization. In the past I have belonged to the Lions Club and Rotary Club. I made not only

great connections but also good friendships. At La Foret I saw an opportunity to join the County Parks Board and went for it. I have not only met the County Commissioners, but La Foret is now mentioned regularly in county meetings as an example of how the county and nonprofits should work together. It is also likely that we will be able to build a disc golf course for free and be able to access hundred of thousands of dollars in county park money because of this relationship.

GET OUT, GO PLACES, TRY NEW THINGS, AND MEET PEOPLE

My message is just get out, go places, try new things, and meet people. If you believe in your organization and can convey your message to others, good things will happen. The best way to get where you are going isn't always a straight line. The world is curved and full of obstacles, so try different paths. You never know where they might lead you.

About the Author

Ralph Townsend is the Executive Director of the La Foret Conference & Retreat Center in the Black Forest of Colorado Springs, Colorado. He has also been the director of the Variety Club Camp and Developmental Center special needs camp for children in Worcester, Pennsylvania and the Boys & Girls Clubs of America's Olivet Blue Mountain Camp in Hamburg, PA. Ralph is a new member of IACCA.

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About IACCA

The International Association of Conference Center Administrators (IACCA) is an association of nonprofit conference center professionals committed to education, professionalism, and support.

1. IACCA offers educational opportunities for its members and for those with whom they work.
2. IACCA promotes professional excellence in nonprofit conference center leadership, administration, and operation.
3. IACCA provides a supportive community that facilitates the sharing of knowledge and experience and the addressing of common challenges.