11/01/10

Notes from a Conversation with Shadi Afshar, Audience Development Manager at the Texas Tribune

**Background:** Shadi Afshar joined the Texas Tribune in early June and is developing a sustainable membership program at the organization. What follows are her thoughts regarding the kinds of audience development and intra-organizational work it takes to strategically and successfully launch a membership platform—plus a short analysis of the Texas Tribune’s first year in operation.

**Why membership?** Membership is a matter of business. When it comes down to it, a non-profit must run on support from its audience/community. TT is not saving the whales or babies, so they have to garner support in different ways by building emotional support. It's necessary. Major donations only go to an extent, whereas membership offers constant sustaining money and are garners community.

**How is a membership model different than regular donors and fundraising efforts?**

TT uses a model that’s similar to NPR. It also has three tiers to define various users:

1.) General audience. Everything is free to public because that is TT’s obligation as an organization.

2.) Registered users who comment and get enewsletters.

3.) Members. These are people who are part of the donor community. They are advocates and supporters of TT’s mission: "a smarter, better Texas." They contribute money on an annual level, and using the tagline really helps them see how they are different from general audience.

The biggest challenge is to define membership for the audience. The best thing to do is write out a basic strategy defining membership and its accompanying regulations. A lot of times when you tell people to become members, if you don't have standards, they'll ride it however they want to.

**How do you best recruit and locate members?**

Recommend reaching out in bulk to Universities or technical associations to market memberships to their lists and communities. For example, if we offer your association membership to TT, they will get a discounted membership or an extra premium. You can also set goals for the partner organization. If you’re working with a health care association, you could tailor news alerts to send to that association’s community—provided that they bring in 50 new members. Another example for partnerships: With the holidays coming up, offer the organization a discounted sponsorship or rotation on your site (ads) if they promote membership to your community. Being creative about bringing in bulk membership means doing lots of searching, researching, and reaching out. Facebook makes a huge difference and is ideal for recruiting and converting audiences.

TT has gotten almost 200 new members since September and aren't doing much marketing outside of their network. They are, however, thinking creatively about the next generation of membership and working to recruit early by focusing on universities and building a foundation for membership with students, whom Shadi considers the next set of philanthropic givers.  TT started university push last month and by the end of the year they're going to be involved with journalism schools at the three biggest universities in Texas.

Student Membership benefits include: Costs $10 a year, the get to come to anniversary party for free, get a t-shirt and other special treats to encourage engagement.

**What kinds of benefits and incentives should members get?**

Shadi helped develop benefits at TT and has the following recommendations:

* Membership needs to offer some kind of exclusivity. TT offers intimate communication with founder Evan Smith as part of an exclusive invitation for members who give over $500.
* TT also offers joint subscriptions—like to the Texas Monthly.
* Membership is a community. Members get a special member newsletter, get their names posted on the sustainer wall, which is a section on the site that names are posted.
* You don’t have to give out t-shirts, but a benefit of recognition or exclusivity must be clear.

**One Year Evaluation:**What strategies have been successful and why?

Just the fact that TT established a membership is huge. Membership started on spreadsheets and TT is using a CRM now, which allows them to target communications to boost engagement. They are also starting to understand and have communications with members. Even though it's small, having one voice (that’s Shadi) that represents membership makes a big difference. Shadi’s signature is on membership communications and she acts as an ombudsman between the organization and members.

**What do you see as the three most vital components to building a successful membership strategy?**

1.) Defining Membership specifically so that everyone (staff and audience) has the same idea as to what membership is. The entire organization needs to understand what membership is and set those standards.

2.) Be able to manage constituent relations at a higher level. The more targeted your emails and appeals are, the bigger your response will be. Being able to analyze is vital. TT started out just managing members on a spreadsheet, but saw a marked jump in engagement when they were able to target and segment their lists.

3.) Benefits are important, but the sense of community is key.