

Raising Institutional Visibility Lessons Learned From Nine “Cultural Gems”

Overview

Organizations seeking to better serve the public can benefit from the lessons of major public institutions that have reinvented themselves and redefined their field and their institutional type.

A few years ago, Communication*Works* LLC studied nine preeminent public institutions that represent a range of geographic locations and fields, including culture, politics, journalism, recreation, scientific and social research, and higher learning. Institutions studied included major libraries and museums, a national news organization, think tanks, universities, and a prominent community center.

These institutions were selected because they are exemplars in their fields and place education, whether formal or informal, as central to their mission. We chose institutions where reputation, visibility, and audience extend far beyond the bounds of a particular field of expertise and that continually redefined the nature of their type of institution.

We posed a common series of questions to each of the executives interviewed. The questionnaire was designed principally to discover basic common factors that contribute to the institutions’ success, sterling reputations, and high visibility within their fields, in the media, and in the public at large. We also queried the interview subjects about best practices for expanding outreach and maintaining and enhancing an institution’s reputation; their concerns about institutional branding; their promotion of scholarship and expertise; and how their institutions define their missions and develop strategic plans. We also asked them for their most valuable advice about beginning a strategic planning process and working to enhance an institution’s visibility and public profile. What we learned is summarized below.

Key Lessons

Institutions become cultural gems because they possess a resource or provide a service that is unique, or of unsurpassed quality, and make it accessible to the widest possible audience. Noted one leader, a defining attribute of a “cultural gem” institution is “having something very precious to share with your community and then integrating it, making it meaningful and relevant to the life of that community.”

The institutions we examined did not become successful overnight and are committed to re-examining their purpose. Many organizations adapted their missions after achieving initial goals. Many continue to evolve in order to respond to changing societal priorities, and some to broaden outreach to serve diverse populations.

The institutions reflect the cultural context in which they function. Once they define their public, or publics, they embrace and serve that public in very direct and tangible ways. In so doing, they engender “brand loyalty” toward the institution and its services. Executives we spoke with noted that their institution’s success, high visibility, and positive public image rest on three pillars: an institution-wide commitment to excellence; the closely related factor of staff quality; and carving out and dominating a niche.

At these “Cultural Gem” institutions:

- **Missions and goals are clear, concise, and directed toward serving their constituencies**, which, in every case, included the general public or, at the least, a broad cross-section of the general public.
- **Organizational culture seeks to achieve high standards as part of a collective effort**. All parts of the organization strive constantly to improve and to identify emerging audience needs and institutional opportunities.
- **Leaders go to great lengths to capture good ideas and bring them to fruition**. They encourage their staff to take risks and learn from failed efforts. They have achieved acclaim by pushing on substantive and strategic boundaries.
- **Institutions hire and retain the top people in their fields and replace them with comparable talent when they leave**. Executives emphasized the value of their “supporting actors,” particularly those in communications, marketing, and fundraising roles. Staff members embrace their institution’s mission, feel they are co-owners and co-creators, and are obliged to proselytize on its behalf.
- **Institutions clearly define success, identify how to measure it, and dedicate resources to track progress**. Measures of success varied with the nature of its enterprise. The organizations pay close attention to admissions and attendance numbers, penetration of ideas in the intellectual marketplace, and reaping rewards from positive press that go beyond the number and quality of press hits to include the fallout from and impact of those stories on attendance and fundraising, and service to communities, such as the number of young people enrolled in education programs.
- **Institutions candidly assess past institutional performance**. They review what worked and failed in previous planning efforts, seek input from outside experts, community representatives, and a wider range of staff members to add impartiality to performance assessment and planning. They recommend setting

measurable goals; being open to new ideas and not “pre-planning” the plan; and above all, identifying objectives at which the institution can excel and promoting institution-wide understanding of and devotion to achieving them.

- **Brands are used uniformly and consistently, and organizations that have gained reputations for different aspects of their work use their strongest brands to promote the identity of the whole.** Most organizations continually conduct market research to see how a brand is holding up and what it conjures in the minds of the publics it serves.
- **The organizations mine their institutions for information and stories and use major events, publications, the Internet, and other communications tools in concert to drive strategic messages.**
- **Leaders value communications** – both from the institution outward and from the outside into the institution.

Communication**Works**, L.L.C.
1752 N Street, NW, Sixth Floor
Washington, D.C. 20036
Phone: (202) 955-9540
Fax: (202) 955-5770