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A Little Good Advice *Ray Mark Rinaldi*

(Editor's note: The interview below with Bruce D. Thibodeau, ACG President, appeared in the November/December 2007 issue of *Inside Arts: The Magazine of the Association of Performing Arts Presenters* and is reprinted with permission.)

RAY RINALDI: Government funding is stable, censorship controversies are rare. No one seems to be complaining too loudly that money is tight. Are these good times for the arts in the U.S.?

BRUCE THIBODEAU: There are still a tremendous number of sustainability challenges out there for our cultural organizations. Balancing the needs of artists, audiences, donors, communities, boards, management, educators and any number of stakeholders seems to get harder every year. But luckily, we've become more resilient in our ability to find creative solutions. There are huge successes that so many arts organizations are having nationally. Congratulations and thank you to all of the people who make it happen every day.

RINALDI: "Green" giving is in. Yet arts presenters need to continue luring support from patrons. How do they convince donors and volunteers that supporting dancers, musicians and painters is as important as fighting against global warming and water contamination in the Third World?

THIBODEAU: We all have things that we're passionate about. Even though it seems to have become a recent phenomenon, we all want to create a sustainable world. It is about truly listening and creating public discussion about what provides for the best quality of life. It has been a long evolution for the green movement to make inroads. But they never swayed in their commitment. At first, they approached the challenge from a purely scientific way. Then it became economic. Then educational. And now even religious! I'm of an abundance mentality-there is enough support out there for environmental, educational, religious, medical and cultural causes. But our industry has to have clarity and focus in our messages that relate to our impact on making the world a better place.

RINALDI: If there is one mistake you see arts groups make again and again, what would it be? You have to pick one.

THIBODEAU: That's a tough one. But if I had to pick one, it would likely be the lack of well-researched planning and knowing who should be involved in that planning process. When I say "planning," I don't necessarily mean strategic planning, which of course is crucial to advancing any cultural organization's mission and generating personal commitment to its success.

But everything, from preparing to build a new facility to undertaking a capital campaign, transitioning artistic or executive leadership or instituting new programmatic and educational initiatives, requires careful research and discussion with key stakeholders. Unfortunately, I've seen too many instances where people inside organizations can become myopic and believe that it is all about "them" rather than those that they're meant to serve.

RINALDI: What's the biggest mistake arts groups make in recruiting and keeping board members? People often seem eager to serve and have a genuine love for the work, but too often they don't come through. Is it their fault?

THIBODEAU: The significant growth in the number and breadth of nonprofits has really strained the work of board volunteers. And most cultural organizations are in crisis, needing to build a diverse board of a certain size, which sometimes means bringing on the wrong board member. But many times, volunteers forget that a board of "trustees" is exactly that—a group whose responsibility is to hold our cultural organizations in public trust and to do what's best for their community. And again, planning an effective board building process can reap big rewards.

Developing a plan to identify, cultivate and recruit the right people is key. Then knowing how to orient, educate and engage those volunteers plays a big role. And finally, remembering to evaluate, rotate and celebrate their accomplishments will ensure that the board, and hopefully the organization, is moving in the right direction.

RINALDI: One big issue for arts organizations is luring new talent to the administrative side. Do you think enough is being done to make a career in culture appealing? Let's face it, the work will never pay big bucks.

THIBODEAU: I remember when I was in high school and told my parents that I was going to college to study music. My dad said "how are you gonna make a living tootin' your flute?" Back then, I guess my response was, "Well, dad, I actually play sax, but I really love music and want to work on the business side of it."

I didn't totally know what that meant at 18 or how my career would evolve. I think that there's still a misperception of the "starving artist" that exists today. But overall, I'd have to say that the best quality of life can be found in doing what you really love and being around people that make the world a better place.

RINALDI: You're a proponent for Internet use. Do you think arts groups, as a whole, are tech savvy, or do they fall behind?

THIBODEAU: I think that the larger organizations are doing quite well, but I worry that the mid-sized and smaller ones struggle to keep up. There are so many urgent needs in our business that many times important infrastructure gets overlooked.

RINALDI: Marketing has become so expensive but more important than ever. What are you finding effective these days? Should arts presenters be looking at the Internet for that?

THIBODEAU: Sometimes organizations believe that there is a magic pill, and that somehow the Internet, a popular program, or the right marketing or fundraising professional will solve all of their challenges. But it all has to start with an effective and well-planned community engagement process.

Arts presenters, all cultural institutions, need to find better ways to create public discussion about their programs, vision, importance and any number of externally focused issues. Ultimately the "viral marketing"-formerly known as "word-of-mouth"-will allow the community to build consensus, participation and support for an institution and its impact.

RINALDI: Do you think the arts have enough political clout in this country? Is it better at the local level or national level

THIBODEAU: As they say, all politics is local, but creating that community discussion builds national attention. I think that we've evolved greatly in the past few years as an arts and culture industry. Various cultural disciplines and their national associations are realizing that we have more synergy working together in our advocacy efforts. They are forming effective strategic partnerships on the local, state and national levels to educate our community leaders, time and again, that the arts are good for the cultural, educational, social and economic development of our country.

RINALDI: Do you think there is a correlation between good art and good organization? Sometimes, the best art comes out of chaos, no?

THIBODEAU: I think it's amazing that the formation of most arts organizations comes from an entrepreneurial spark and intuition from a few people with little planning. And as an "artpreneur" myself, I adore that passion and vision have significant artistic and community impact. I have to agree with Albert Einstein who said, "I believe in intuition and inspiration . . . at times I feel certain that I am right while not knowing the reason. . . . Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited, whereas imagination embraces the entire world, stimulating progress, giving birth to evolution."

But I also think that most arts organizations should not expect that their constituents, funders, management and volunteers will understand and wholeheartedly support "intuition." With that said, even Einstein might recommend planning as a way to take the intuition, passion and vision of the few and share this inspiration with the world.

RINALDI: You're an expert on fundraising: What kind of cookies do you think sell best at intermission?

THIBODEAU: The ones that make audiences want to come back for more! Everything that happens related to the performance "experience," from how easy it is to buy a ticket all the way through to when someone is driving out of the parking lot at the end of a great performance, has an impact. And a happy audience member becomes a generous supporter - emotionally, intellectually and financially.

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