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The Power of Saying Thank You **Martin Bragg, Senior Vice President**

Many international dictionaries define the phrase “Thank You” quite simply as – **a polite expression used when acknowledging a gift, service, or compliment.** However, the true concept of these two seemingly simple words has the potential to be one of the greatest assets for arts and culture organizations. There is no cost to use this phrase and yet the dividends are tremendous. In this edition of *Arts Insights*, we will focus on who you should thank, why you should thank them, and the most effective ways to do so.

RECOGNIZE YOUR STAFF

Does your organization have a system for recognizing its employees? If not, the easiest thing a supervisor can ever do is say to a staff member, “Thanks for a great job.” A recent employee engagement survey of more than 30,000 workers at organizations worldwide found that only 21 percent of workers felt strongly valued in the workplace.¹ Globoforce, a multinational company that focuses on employee retention and recognition, concurred. According to their 2012 report *The Growing Influence of Employee Recognition*, 55 percent of workers would leave their current job for a company that recognizes employee efforts and contributions.² Employees who feel appreciated for their efforts work harder, take fewer days off, and stay with an organization longer. The simple act of saying thank you empowers employees and makes for a stronger team.

APPRECIATE YOUR VOLUNTEERS

How often do you thank your trustees? Maintaining an effective, well-governed board of directors is crucial for an arts and culture organization. And still, the time worn phrase, “give, get, or get off” is used as a means of identifying strong and effective trustees. They are expected to give large gifts, help acquire sponsorships, buy tables at special events, underwrite productions, lead capital campaigns, and attend important donor meetings. Those opportunities to say “thank you for everything you do to support this company” are critical in gaining continued and increased support from the board of directors. Harvard Business School professor Francesca Gino describes this as the “gratitude effect.” By expressing thankfulness, the recipient of your gratitude feels an enhanced sense of self-worth and is therefore more likely to help you and others in the future.³

A number of years ago after a particularly difficult but successful meeting with a government funder, I turned to the chair of the board and said, “Thank you for taking the time to be here with us. Your passion as a volunteer member of our company and a leader in the community made all the difference today.” The board chair looked right back at me and said, “You are very welcome. I sit on a lot of corporate boards, and sure I get paid to sit on those, but the payback for my time as a volunteer on this board is hearing the simple words of thank you.”

¹ “The 7 Key Trends Impacting Today’s Workplace,” *TINYpulse*, accessed February 23, 2016, www.tinypulse.com/2014-employee-engagement-organizational-culture-report.

² “Spring 2012 Report: The Growing Influence of Employee Recognition,” *Globoforce*, March 2012, http://go.globoforce.com/rs/globoforce/images/Mood_Tracker_Spring2012-final_2.pdf.

³ Chuck Leddy, “The Power of ‘Thanks,’” *Harvard Gazette*, March 19, 2013, <http://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2013/03/the-power-of-thanks/>.

ACKNOWLEDGE YOUR DONORS

Do you have a donor acknowledgement strategy? Arts and culture organizations are getting better at measuring how effectively they move supporters up and along “the donor highway,” shifting them from making entry-level contributions to joining elite giving circles, and then to becoming name supporters on a new building. Many nonprofits are very effective at these transitions. However, just as important are the right moments NOT to make that ask. Rather, use that time to say to a donor of any giving level, “Thank you! We are not trying to sell you anything. We just want you to know that we appreciate your support and that you are part of our family.” According to author of *Donor-Centered Fundraising*, Penelope Burk, calling to thank a first-time donor yields 40 percent more contributed revenue in the second year.⁴ Make sure your organization’s development team, high-level executives, or board members are promptly recognizing these individuals for their contributions.

THANK YOUR PATRONS

Lastly, how do you thank your patrons? When starting an earned revenue assessment, think about what you do to recognize these individuals. According to Americans for the Arts, earned income accounts for 60 percent of an arts organization’s total revenue.⁵ It is therefore incredibly important to keep your patrons happy and engaged throughout the year. Institutions that stand out are those that take the time to call, email, send a handwritten note, or create an unexpected, special experience to thank them for their patronage. Canadian banking and financial services corporation TD Bank did just this by surprising its customers for one day, changing ATMs into “Automated Thanking Machines.” More than 30,000 unsuspecting patrons across Canada received gifts ranging from \$20 deposits to specialty experiences like throwing the first pitch at a Toronto Blue Jays game.

While working for an arts organization several years ago, the marketing team decided to do something special for the company’s subscribers halfway through the performance season. Handwriting personally addressed thank you notes (not computer generated ones) and partnering with a local florist, we placed those notes and a single rose on the seats of the subscribers at every show over a six week run. It was a time-consuming program however once the staff saw its effectiveness they realized going that extra mile was worth the effort. Those thank you notes were transformational not only for the subscribers but also for the nonsubscribers. Audience members who did not receive a token of appreciation stopped to ask those around them who did. A seemingly simple concept of thanking subscribers simultaneously increased interest from nonsubscribers to become more loyal patrons. Based on the calls, notes, and emails received after the performances, subscribers felt appreciated and, as a result, closer to the company.

So this year when your organization builds its annual business plan, take some time to put together a ‘Thank You’ strategy. You do not need a costly plan to achieve great impact on your staff, board members, and audience. Schedule quarterly evaluations with employees and personally recognize their achievements. Host a special reception for trustees before opening night. Invite subscribers and first-time donors to a closed rehearsal. Everyone will feel more invested in the organization and you will not be disappointed with the results!

⁴ Chuck Longfield, “We can boost donor retention. But only if we get smart,” *Sofii*, May 23, 2011, <http://sofii.org/article/we-can-boost-donor-retention.-but-only-if-we-get-smart>.

⁵ “Source of Revenue for Nonprofit Arts Organizations (Estimated),” *Americans for the Arts*, last modified 2014, accessed March 3, 2016, http://www.americansforthearts.org/sites/default/files/ArtsFacts_ArtsOrganizationRevenues2014.pdf.



ACG Senior Vice President **Martin Bragg** joined the firm in 2015 to lead its Canada subsidiary. With a career spanning more than 30 years, Mr. Bragg's wide-ranging experience in presenting, producing, and managing large arts organizations includes executive director positions at Alberta Ballet and the School of Alberta Ballet and the Vancouver Playhouse; executive and artistic director positions at Canada Stage Company; and vice president, commissioner, and producer for the Canadian Pavilion and the Expo '92 nightly closing production. Mr. Bragg has a long history of volunteerism and community service including serving as president of the PACT Communications Center, vice chair of the Professional Association of Canadian Theatres, and national chair of the Equity negotiating committee. He was also a founding member of the Minister's Advisory Council for Arts and Culture. Mr. Bragg is based in ACG's Calgary office.

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