

A Membership Strategy of Engagement: The Vancouver Board of Trade

This is a story about membership engagement and growth based on learning, education & training, permission and a ‘perfect storm’ of research on engagement through the power of *positive networking*.

The Challenge

For well over a decade until 2003, The Vancouver Board of Trade’s membership had languished around the 4,000 mark. This fact was itself a worthy achievement given widespread erosion in chamber of commerce and association membership over many years, continent-wide. The Toronto Board of Trade’s membership, for example, fell 7000 (40%) in the ‘90’s. The trend of falling engagement was reflected in most facets of social activity--from parent/teacher association attendance, to voter turnout, to active church participation.

Harvard dean, Robert Putnam, chronicled the phenomenon in his award-winning book, *Bowling Alone* (Simon and Shuster 2000). Bowling was a metaphor for citizen disengagement. While more were bowling, they only did it with their close friends; league bowling was down 40 percent since the 1960’s. Generally, fewer people were engaged in society, groups and associations. Individuals and corporations increasingly turned inward. They became ‘silo-centric’--a phenomenon chambers run into daily.

The Strategy

The challenge in reframing a Board growth strategy was exacerbated by the ‘hollowing-out’ of large enterprises in Vancouver, beginning in the early ‘90’s. More than 100 medium-large corporate offices disappeared through mergers, acquisitions and relocations. The strategy would have to be extremely innovative—pulling the proverbial rabbit out of a hat. Just maintaining membership had been a noteworthy achievement.

Public policy initiatives--like promoting the North America Free Trade Agreement, a fast lane at the Canada-US border--now the very successful Nexus lane--privatization of Vancouver International Airport, and reductions in Vancouver’s high business property taxes were only a few of The Board’s high-impact successes. Even though public policy doesn’t easily sell

memberships directly, it was key to the brand and vital to the strategy. We had to continue to excel in this arena.

Another core activity, which was vital for growth, was programs: speakers; education; and, events. Here, the Board's high quality offerings were reviewed and expanded. The *Distinguished Speaker's Program*, with speakers such as Prince Philip, George Bush, Jane Goodall, Lee Kwan Yew of Singapore, Chief Secretary of Hong Kong Anson Chan, former Philippine president, Fidel Ramos and Michael Dell would now be complemented by new offerings.

The *Greater Vancouver Leadership Summit*, the *British Columbia Economic Forum*, and *Manager's Toolbox* and *Board Bootcamp* seminars targeted professionals, managers and entrepreneurs. The innovative *Leaders of Tomorrow Program* and the *Company of Young Professionals* enrolled and engaged hundreds of young people as new Board members, with mentors. Total offerings were expanded to over 500 annual events and meetings annually. Disney-style standards of service were adopted. In fact, it is no coincidence that The Board has offered standards-of-service programming to our members and staff in concert with the Disney Corporation for over 5 years--a first for Canada.

A fresh website, www.boardoftrade.com (now with 6,000+ pages of information), a revamped monthly *Sounding Board* newspaper and a new and energized membership team were all vital innovative increments for change. But what else could we do to give us a greater comparative advantage? What innovation--what "change that creates a new dimension of performance" (Peter Drucker)--could we make? The answer was right before us.

The Board had achieved an enviable reputation as the top networking venue on the Pacific coast. It was something members valued. Famous business historian, Peter C. Newman, even commented on this in his best-seller, *The Titans*. Following that endorsement, we began hosting monthly new-member networking training seminars. While very popular, something was still

missing: it was the conceptual underpinnings of the networking discipline. People just didn't believe in it. Homework time.

Generally, people are not very good at networking. Most don't like it, and many feel it is a waste of effort. The Managing Director, Darcy Rezac, and two members--Judy Thomson and Gayle Hallgren--began doing research for a book on the subject. They were coached by Dr Daniel F Muzyka, dean of the Sauder School of Business at The University of British Columbia and advised by Tom Donohue, President of the US Chamber of Commerce. Board chairman of the day, Peter Legge and director, Frank Borowicz, encouraged them. And what a treasure-trove of new research they stumbled upon! It helped create a new ethos: *engagement through positive networking*, the cornerstone of The Board's new growth strategy.

The Stress Dragon

As it turns out, most people are uncomfortable networking. Professor Ken Prkachin's of the University of Northern British Columbia has conducted research that shows most of us would rather do a difficult assignment at work than meet new people. Many register an increase in blood pressure when asked to meet strangers. I call this common anxiety *networking nervosus*—it can usually be fixed, easily.

Author of *Social Intelligence*, psychology guru Dr. Daniel Goleman, has demonstrated that fundamental interpersonal skills improve social success. Unlike physical intelligence, which we can't do much about, Goleman demonstrated that *emotional intelligence* skills can be learned. When they are we are more successful in business and life. This is good news for those who believe in networking--done right.

While some may lack the social skills to network, others just don't think it works. In groundbreaking research, mathematicians Duncan Watts and Steve Strogatz proved that we are connected to everyone else by no more than 6 handshakes (6 degrees of separation). And, the counterintuitive findings of sociologist Mark Granovetter illustrated that weak contacts—people we barely know—most often end up being the most important to our success. The message? We are more connected than we think and all contacts count.

But how do we define success? In our book, success is defined by personal and organizational well-being and happiness, rather than money. Research shows money can help, but not much. University of British Columbia economist and well-being researcher John Helliwell and Robert Putnam report that once we earn as much as our peers, it is trust and how connected we are that determines our well-being and happiness.

Putting the ‘Pefect Storm’ of New Research Findings to Work

In fact, it was a ‘perfect storm’ of research on the importance of networks, engagement and connectedness to success—happiness and well being—that provided the conceptual underpinnings for the book, *Work the Pond!* (Prentice Hall, NY) which was first published in early 2003 as *The Frog and Prince: Secrets of Positive Networking*. It became The Vancouver Board of Trade’s connector’s handbook for member engagement based on the trademarked concept of positive networking. It provided the basis for the Board’s new corporate strategy. New findings in sociology, psychology and mathematics became a beacon for change. In Putnam’s bowling parlance, the message was ‘right up our alley.’ All new members were offered a comprehensive workshop on the skills of positive networking, and then given countless opportunities to practice them. The book has been published in Canada, the US, China, Korea and Russia.

So, what is positive networking? Positive networking is *discovering what we can do for someone else*. It is not all about us. Positive networking is based upon relationships, trust and reputation, rather than referrals and sales. In fact, it’s the over-emphasis on sales that give traditional networking—transactional networking practiced by many business organizations—its well-deserved bad rap.

Positive networking also is about permission: giving ourselves, and those we meet, permission to connect and build relationships. It’s how over 250,000 in-person contacts are made at Board of Trade events annually. People gather with a sense of purpose to work on policy presentations to government, to hear a learned speaker or to participate in a professional development seminar. They are given permission to network—positively. It is this incidental, even oblique, benefit that adds so much value to the membership experience.

The Bottom Line

Through an ethos of positive networking, corporate, professional and personal well-being--happiness--has become The Board's stock in trade. Members became engaged. They joined, participated and contributed. They stayed. They also embraced new opportunities for community engagement, like the innovative Board of Trade, *Spirit of Vancouver* campaign--a highly successful program of community awareness and recognition. The Board's comptroller, Jack Wong was appointed Chief Happiness Officer (CHO).

How well has it worked? Very well, indeed. Over the past four years, membership has increased by 30% to 5500 (see chart.) The Vancouver Board of Trade has become a merchant of engagement--and proud of it!

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