

Building Long-term Strategic Direction for your Think Tank

Chris Derry

Founder and President

Bluegrass Institute for Public Policy, Kentucky

Why do you exist? Why should I give you some of my money? What can such a small organization like yours hope to accomplish?

If I have heard these questions once, I've heard them a hundred times. How do you answer them for your think tank? With a new perspective, it is my hope that you will respond with a smile on your face and renewed passion in your voice.

Why don't people love the work you do enough to shower you with donations? To be blunt, because donors don't care about you; they care only about themselves and their organizations.

If you describe your work in terms of how they might help you, too many prospects just don't get it. If you respond to the question, "Why do you exist?" by saying, "To champion liberty, free markets and limited government," all but the most ardent libertarians will probably smile and nod in agreement. But they won't write you a check!

However, they will reach for their checkbooks if your response recognizes that every prospect has an imaginary rotating beacon on his head with this flashing signal: "WIIFM," which stands for "What's in it for me!" If your response doesn't answer this unstated question, you're likely to hear, "Let me think about it."

At the Bluegrass Institute, we respond this way: "Our main concern is that too many Kentuckians think government should operate like an engine, propelling society. Instead, we believe government should act more like a rudder, guiding -- not interfering with -- individual initiative. What do you think?"

This opening rarely fails to generate a spirited discussion about how government is encroaching upon the prospect's liberty. It enables you to set the stage for a discussion on their views, instead of yours. This enables you to learn about his principal concerns so you can address how your organization seeks to resolve them.

Which brings me to my second subject: Is your organization focused on resolving concerns that could get people excited about your organization? This doesn't mean you should provide intellectual ammunition to curb roving dogs in their neighborhood, stop the annexation of their home by their city government or turn down the volume of boom boxes that blare in the night. It does, however, mean that you tackle public-policy issues that matter to most people.

How you choose the work you do should be a subset of the major concerns of the people in your state or country. So every time you talk to a potential donor, the media or a politician, your views light up the debate and those watching and listening know what you intend to accomplish. After a lot of thinking, we arrived at the following two generational objectives:

1. By lessening the stranglehold of excessive government spending, taxation and regulation, privatizing public services and securing their property rights, *Kentucky becomes the safe haven for entrepreneurs across America.*
2. Parents, not place of residence, should determine where children attend public and non-public schools. By holding principals accountable for their performance, Kentucky's public schools are acknowledged as being the finest in America.

We believe these two issues capture the lion's share of the concerns of job creators, workers and parents. People frequently ask us, "How are you going to do that?" And that is exactly the question we want them to ask. If we can entice people to ask the questions they are most interested in, we can be ready with great answers that convey how we are worthy of their investment.

Last, let me talk about getting your word out effectively. The old model of pressing ink on paper and hoping the world beats a path to your door is on its deathbed. People can't care about your ideas unless they read, see and hear them.

My colleague, Jon Caldara, president of Colorado's Independence Institute, says it best: "Speak more; write less." With the explosion of alternative media on the World Wide Web, today's think tanks must broaden and become increasingly versatile in their communication strategies.

Today you have to say it, speak it, televise it, broadcast it, e-mail it, blog it, podcast it, Webcast it and debate it. You have to know, understand and cultivate every form of media and make it convenient for all of these mediums to use your ideas.

We decided our mission should be, "Best practices for a better Kentucky." Occasionally we develop state-specific research, but most often we leverage the great research ideas from the Atlas Economic Research Foundation, State Policy Network, and other great Webcasters. When we grow up to be big boys like Mackinac, Evergreen and Heartland, we will generate more proprietary research. But for now, we borrow from the best!

To communicate effectively today, your organization's skill sets must include public speaking, debating, conducting interviews, broadcasting, producing multimedia products, using the World Wide Web, creating new Web sites, podcasting and more.

When you utilize all of these media, your customers – including your Board of Directors, staff, donors, elected officials and colleagues – will better understand where you are headed and how to help you. You will wake up each morning more excited about the future you are creating, and have the money in your bank account to do it!