

Tips for Young Think Tanks That Want to Grow Fast

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Young think tanks face particular difficulties and challenges in trying to establish themselves as a viable institution, attract financial support and media attention, manage a small team with limited resources, develop a specific niche, etc.

As a young think tank which has successfully gone through this start-up phase, we believe some of the lessons we learned may be useful to others in the same situation. Since the beginning of its operations in November 1998, the Montreal Economic Institute has experienced very fast growth, on several counts (budget, number of employees, media exposure, etc.). Indeed, going from: a yearly budget of \$15,000 to one of more than a million dollars in 2004, one part time employee to 10 full time employees, no media hit to 727 hits as of mid-December 2004.

The following is of course not an infallible recipe and some of these points may not be appropriate or may not work for other organizations, or may already seem obvious to some people. However, we think they are key strategic choices that we have made, deliberately or not, during this start-up phase, and which have contributed to our current success.

GOVERNING STRUCTURE

In our opinion, the governing board should be comprised in its majority of business people who have succeeded in their enterprise and career, are well-respected and ideally have a personal fortune. These people should have good experience in management and an understanding of the challenges involved in building an enterprise, raising money, and securing a good corporate image while exploiting a particular niche.

One of the most important roles of governing board members is as intermediary with potential donors. Donors have to be reassured that the new think tank is a serious enterprise. Being able to use the names of prestigious business people on the board, who can personally contact the potential donors if need be, and encourage them to give, is of crucial importance.

Members should have a pragmatic outlook and not necessarily be consistent and hardcore libertarians. What is important is that they understand and support free-market ideas in general, and are willing to devote time and money to help disseminate these ideas. A young free-market think tank for strategic reasons should simultaneously push some ideas in watered-down form; in addition to others that will be perceived as more radical.

Based on a presentation delivered at the Atlas Liberty Forum in April 2004

Members should be committed enough to go along with the more radical stuff, but also flexible and pragmatic enough to see the need for more mainstream interventions, especially during the first years of operation.

A governing board should *not* include many academics and people who are well-known as militants and ideological fighters, even though it seems natural to invite them when setting up a new institution. Our experience is that they tend to be insensitive to the financial necessities of running an operation with staff and various costs, and to the strategic steps involved in building a niche and a public image. They usually have few contacts among potential donors. Also, they tend to judge all interventions in terms of their ideological purity only, which invariably creates disagreements and conflicts. Although these people may be among the pillars and best-known figures of the libertarian movement in a given region, they usually got there because they were willing to sacrifice financial rewards and establishment recognition to advance their ideas. They certainly deserve admiration for their courage and commitment, but this strategy will not work. A public policy think tank will not be able to raise money from businesses and will not be considered serious by the mainstream media if it is seen as too radical and way outside the mainstream. The intellectual fighters should be kept on the academic board (which, if you have one, should have a *consultative* role only and a clearly defined one) or as occasional contributors, but not invited on the governing board.

FUNDRAISING

Please read on this matter, and on important related matters, the “*One on one with Michel Kelly-Gagnon*” in the Quarterly Newsletter of the Atlas Network of Fall 2004 available at: www.atlasusa.org/highlight_archive/2004-Fall-Highlights.pdf

STAFF

It is a lot more important for young think tanks with a very small team to hire generalists who can perform various types of work (fundraise, write letters, manage publications and events, know the media and communications, etc.) than to hire a very competent specialist who can do only one thing properly. Flexibility and versatility at this stage are much more important than depth and experience.

The availability of outside collaborators, who can be counted on to do contractual work (i.e., without the need to pay them a regular and full-time salary), is also extremely helpful; although experience shows that full time permanent employees are absolutely crucial to the sustained growth of a think tank.

The same is true for researchers: the flexible generalist with a vast (if superficial) knowledge of public policy, who can write and comment on several topics, writes well and is media friendly, will be a lot more useful than the specialist who knows everything about one topic but is only at ease in the rarefied air of academia. The latter may bring more recognition in small academic circles, but you are not a university faculty, you are a think tank. Specialised research can always be outsourced if necessary, it does not need to

be done by someone on your staff, at least not when you are a small or mid-size think tank (say for a think tank of 10 employees or less).

It is not necessary to worry about the “ideological purity” of employees; especially those not involved in intellectual work, as long as they understand the mission of the think tank and are committed to its success. People usually end up being caught in the group dynamic and will pull in the same direction even if they are not as ideologically committed as others. It’s important however that you hire people who are not squarely opposed to your goals because these will not be motivated to work for the organisation’s goals. Young think tanks will find it difficult to find the perfect employee; a flexible and competent organizer with little ideological commitment will be preferable to a poor organizer with ideological zeal. What is important is not that each and all employee share the ideological goal, but that the executive director or president and the people responsible for content (those in charge of research and publications), have a clear vision of where they are going.

PUBLICATIONS

You should have a balance between small and large publications, with small ones being by far the priority if you want to generate media coverage. The large ones (more than 10 pages) may seem more serious and bring more respect in academic circles, but very few people actually read them. The goal of a think tank is not to convince a dozen university professors, but to change “public opinion” in a larger sense. Politicians, journalists, businessmen, decisions-makers, and most people interested in a particular topic, rarely have more than 15-20 minutes to devote to reading a study. This is why small and well done publications usually are read by more people and have a greater more impact than larger ones. They are also easier to distribute and to transform into op-ed pieces for newspapers and magazines. To give an example, our main type of publication, *Economic Notes*, contain about 2200 words, two or three graphs, and are published in a compact 4-page format.

You should ideally find one big topic that can create controversy and attract huge attention from the media and the general public, not just from policy wonks. An annual study that evaluates performance (of some aspect of the economy, or schools, hospitals, etc.) often has that kind of impact on the general public (we got it with our annual *Report Card on Quebec’s Secondary Schools*).

There should be consistency and continuity in the format, title and look of your publications, so that readers can easily recognize them. You should also concentrate on a limited number of large themes (four or five, like health care, housing, transportation or the environment) so that you can build recognition and develop expertise on these themes. That allows you to build a series (for example, you can put “Fiscal Policy Series” on the cover page of your latest study, which shows you are real experts when discussing this topic!). You are also more likely to have an impact if you address the same issue more than once, than if you don’t return to it until years later. It is easier to interest

donors when you can show them a list of publications on the same issue, and explain how you had an impact on the debate, and your overall vision as to how to change things in this field. Of course, this should serve as a general guideline, and not prevent you from addressing an issue you feel is very important and topical. **Nevertheless, it is in our opinion crucial that you avoid “shooting in all directions”.**

It is extremely important to have nicely designed publications. Not only will readers enjoy reading them, but that will bring an image of seriousness, professionalism and prestige to your organisation that is essential to building credibility. Several studies show that readers associate (if only unconsciously) the quality of the content of a publication to the quality of its presentation.

Books are a plus, but should not be a priority for small think tanks with limited resources. They cost a good deal of money to produce and generally don't generate a terrific “bang for the buck”. If you can publish one a year in collaboration with an established publisher, that should be it. If you can't find any established publisher willing to partner with you for the publication of your book (especially when you can guarantee to them that you will buy and distribute a large of copies), then you should really ask yourself if you have a quality product in the first place. Our experience is that good publishers publish good books; this is true, regardless of their own ideological preferences.

EVENTS

There should be a balance between “prestige events” featuring well-known speakers but with sometimes little “hard” policy content, and more academic conferences for the policy-oriented people. The first type is crucial to attracting donors and to positioning you as a place where important people can go for networking. It can also bring more media attention. The latter type of event will in general not attract donors or as many journalists. Devoting all of your resources to organising serious, policy oriented events, is a mistake, even though you may feel this is closer to your core mission as a think tank.

It is better to have fewer well-organized and attended events (four or five a year) that will bring a maximum of benefits (generate media interviews and reports, content on your website, interest from donors, people who did not know you before, etc.) than to schedule several events that will mobilise your staff and resources but only attract a small crowd of already converted people. Don't forget: an event where few people attend is an event that may actually end-up hurting your credibility. Always rent a room that is a bit too small than what you actually need as it is inevitable that some people will cancel at the last minute and that others will not showing up on the day of the event, even though they have not formally cancel. If the room is overcrowded? So much the better!

COMMUNICATIONS

A comprehensive, easy to consult and use, database of all donors, subscribers, media contacts and supporters should be developed as quickly as possible. As soon as you have two or three employees, one of them should have among his tasks, to develop and up-date

your database. A large and up-to-date database is, along with money, the “nerve of the war”.

A well-designed, easy to consult and frequently updated website can attract many people and give an image of importance to a small think tank that is out of proportion to its actual resources.

Getting the mainstream media’s attention should be a priority. It is through the mainstream media that potential donors, policy makers and the general public get to know about you. It is crucial that you develop a strategy to get access to the mainstream media, not only by having your publications reported on, but also by publishing op-ed articles, and having your opinion being sought on the issues you have an expertise in. Starting with friendly business-oriented publications is a good way to get your first media hits. The more hits you have, the more you can say you are attracting attention, and the more you build credibility – which then generates more hits.

-Hire a person specifically responsible for communications as soon as you possibly can.