

Connecting visitors and your community more deeply to your mission

Randy W. Widera

Parks are priceless. Within their boundaries our collective cultural and natural heritage is preserved and a million opportunities to enjoy time with family and friends to play, experience and learn. As a “public good” parks are not only for the people but they are our responsibility to steward and to ensure that they last for future generations. The work you do as a volunteer, board member and nonprofit professional is essential to fulfill this covenant. It is your local and regional communities, businesses, foundations as well park visitors who are your reservoir of support and resources. With so many other worthy organizations doing great work in your community it is vital for you to demonstrate the impact of the work you do, in ways that connect folks at a deeper level and inspire them to give time and/or money to ensure your continued good work.

So how do we reach people at this deeper level, and especially the great majority who do not have a great awareness of you or the park(s) you serve?

1. **FIND OUT WHY PEOPLE VALUE YOUR PARKS** (Value Proposition) A value proposition tells you exactly what visitor’s and donors value most about your Mission and the parks you serve. This information needs to be solicited through surveys, one-on-one interviews and focus groups. It is critical to make sure that you identify all the entities that derive and add value to your park (Chart 1). By looking outside your organization you will uncover what visitors and community members value most. While Executive Director of the Friends of Santa Cruz State Parks (Friends), I oversaw a study, funded by the Packard Foundation that set out comprehensive surveys and focus groups in Santa Cruz County to find out what people valued about local state parks, how they felt connected to them and how they felt about Friends. The three top conclusions that came out of these studies were:
 - a. The natural beauty and scenic value of the parks were rated as the highest quality of life indicators.
 - b. Individuals identified their greatest personal value to a specific park as well as specific activity in that park.
 - c. Their identity/affinity was with a park and independent of the agency in charge or nonprofit support organization.

Chart 1: Entities that may derive value from, as well as give value to your park



2. **DEVELOP A CLEAR CASE FOR SUPPORT** (Case Statement) of your mission that focuses on the value that visitors and the public gain from what you do. A case statement is a document that provides the rationale and justification of a fundraising effort and call for support. It can make a case for a specific program or project, or it can advocate for general operating support. It focuses on a dilemma that needs to be fixed and explains the organization's proposed resolution. The case statement should include your mission, vision and values statements, and should set out to clearly answer the: who, what, and why of your fundraising efforts. Some questions that an effective case statement might seek to answer include: How does this organization help people? Who do we help? What vital services do we offer? What is our organization's track record? What are our plans for the future? How do we use our money? Why do we deserve support?
3. **MAKE IT EASY FOR PEOPLE TO NOTICE YOU** by developing a recognizable style and look that connects your organization to your park(s), then transmit it in everyway possible. This is called "branding" and "marketing" in the for-profit world this is a critical step for organizations to being recognized by people. From the Friends study described above we devised a campaign to build the identity of the organization in terms of what the majority of folks valued most. Called "That's My Park – Enjoy, Learn and Give Back", it was obvious that if we were to build greater support for our organization we had to tie in directly to how people valued the park and help them make the connection of the importance of our work and their role in sustaining that value. An important aspect of the tag line, "Enjoy, Learn and Give Back," is that it follows the pedagogy followed by State Park interpretive programs.
4. **TELL YOUR STORY** and the stories unfolding everyday in your park using great images and illustrations (a majority of individuals connect to parks through an aesthetic sensibility). The modern parks movement in California began in 1900, with the cry to "Save the Redwoods," and resulted in the formation of Big Basin Redwoods State Park. This was initiated because [Andrew P. Hill](#) was forbidden to photograph redwood trees on private land. Enraged that such beauty and grader was not for everyone, A. P. Hill used his ill-gotten images to tell the story of the redwoods and galvanize a movement to create a "Public Park". By using great images you reinforce the aesthetic and key value that people identify within parks.
5. **PROVIDE TANGIBLE METRICTS** that show the impact and value of your accomplishments (Chart 2). As an exercise, look at all the baseline features of your park and accomplishments of you organization. Use the park on the interpretive programs, and add in key natural and cultural features and specifics on your organizations accomplishments.

Chart 2: Impact and Value provided by your organization



People *get* parks! By this I mean that most of the people you meet already have an intuitive understanding of the value of parks. If you ask your friends, “Do you think parks are valuable? And if, so how are they valuable,” you are sure to mostly hear a resounding “yes!” and then you get a familiar list of the benefits, a place for families to visit, kids to play, see nature, take a hike, swim in the ocean, etc. This intuitive understating of parks can be both a blessing and a curse for those of us in the nonprofit world who are soliciting support for our parks. A curse because people are pretty set in their ways and getting them to develop a deeper understanding of their parks that inspires them to give support and time can be difficult. A blessing because most people do care, so when we are able to connect them with their parks and your mission, in new ways, chances are they will step up in their support. One important lesson that we have learned from the recent park closures (in California, decreased funding of National Parks and struggles in park districts big and small) is that the public does love their parks and they are willing to support the nonprofits that have come to the rescue. With this heightened attention throughout the United States, the time is right and the stage is set for nonprofits supporting parks to raise your profile so your community knows about the good work you do and what they can do to support the parks that they love.

**Business Planning and the “Triple Bottom Line”:
People, Stewardship and Fiscal Sustainability
Randy W. Widera**

The idea of a creating a business plan for a park and for their nonprofit partners can seem to undermine the whole reason for a parks’ existence. For example, when recently giving a presentation on this subject I received several familiar and well-justified protests from the audience; “How can you measure the true value of a Redwood tree... the air they give us... the peace of mind they provide?”

This protest is absolutely correct, for when we measure value as a business it is often done by treating resources and services as commodities and people as solely consumers. In this example, a business plan can be boiled down to strictly a financial calculation of controlling expenses and increasing revenue, where profit is the only measure of success. Redwood trees, as well as all the natural and cultural treasures within our state park system have a value far beyond such a measure and anyone would be right to stay away from looking at our collective heritage in this limited way – isn’t this what we save them from in the first place?

Even in the for-profit world conventional wisdom warns of building your business with profit as your only measure of success and value. This can be folly, driving you toward short-term success while sacrificing long-term growth of your company, environmental sustainability practices and positive impact on peoples’ lives. With this in mind, the emergence of “the triple bottom line” has become a growing concept in business planning as a means to focus on cooperated responsibility and profits. First coined in 1994 as a way to measure the performance of the corporation over time in terms of Profit, People and Planet, it has expanded to nonprofits and governmental agencies in how they define their overall goals to increase their net return or “value” of the fiscal, social and environmental impacts on behalf of their mission and who they serve.

Throughout my career, I have worked with Agency staff and their park partners to develop planning tools with this “triple bottom line” approach. We focus our efforts on driving specific impact and increasing value by establishing tangible fiscal, social and environmental metrics. Our work is accomplished by using the data and information already collected by the California Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR), studying the history of the park and then employing specific business planning strategies that focus on achieving park excellence through increasing bottom line measures (see table 1):

- People - Value to the visitors and recreation
- Stewardship - Value to park resources
- Fiscal Sustainability - Value to fiscal planning

Table 1 – Value based metrics

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| <p>Value to the Visitors & Recreation</p> | <p>Value to Park Resources</p> | <p>Value to Fiscal Sustainability</p> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visitors Served • Quality Of Visitor Service • Recreation Offered • Educational/Interpretive Programs Provided • Volunteer Time Contributed • Outreach To The Community • Partnerships Cultivated And Leveraged | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deferred Maintenance Addressed • Facility Improvements • Land Stewardship • Restoration • Protection • Trails Maintained • Cultural Site Preservation • Species Protection | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Camping Revenue • Cabins • Day Use Revenue • Special Event Revenue • New Enterprise • Retail • Special Tours • Cause Marketing • Fundraising |

These approaches can aide park managers and partners in a number of ways. They allow park managers to identify the areas they need to draw resources to. The process also develops a vocabulary that will allow park managers to articulate the aspects of their work that are successful. The planning process can be a great way for park managers to engage partners in new and more significant ways. In some of the recent work that I have done, going through a business planning process has served as a training ground for managers to employ new strategies as well as increase partner engagement. Though not a panacea, by using traditional business planning strategies, agency and nonprofit park mangers can effectively navigate and evaluate their day-to-day work while managing their larger goals in serving the public and stewarding park resources. Some of the planning strategies include:

- Situation Assessment – Site History, Economic Environment Review, Stakeholder Interviews, Internal & External Assessments and Existing Conditions Summary
- Market Analysis – Visitor Surveys & Analysis, Current & Projected Visitor Demographics, Current & Project Visitor Demand and Market Trends Analysis
- Fiscal Analysis: Revenue/Occupancy Analysis, Multi-year budget & Pro Forma and New Ventures Return on Investment Plan
- Operating and Investment Planning – Organizational Responsibility & Flow Chart, Vendor Review, Staffing Plan & Capacity Analysis, Infrastructure & Program Analysis, Project Investment Plan with Critical paths
- Marketing and Communications Planning – Brand Analysis, Value Proposition, Case Statement and Social Media & Web Strategies



“The redwoods, once seen, leave a mark or create a vision that stays with you always. No one has ever successfully painted or photographed a redwood tree. The feeling they produce is not transferable. From them comes silence and awe. It's not only their unbelievable stature, nor the color which seems to shift and vary under your eyes, no, they are not like any trees we know, they are ambassadors from another time.” - John Steinbeck, *Travels with Charley: In search of America*

Just as John Steinbeck wrote about how impossible it is to capture the Redwoods on canvas or in a photo, their “real value” is beyond description and trying to boil this down to simple metrics should never really be the goal. The challenge today for everyone who is entrusted with managing a public good, whether it is parks, education or social services, is to meet their mission and serve the public in a climate of reduced public funding and increasing costs of service delivery. I believe that by applying a philosophy that focuses on the value of parks and demonstrates good planning and

execution we can make a strong case for the public to support our parks though sufficient and sustained public funding. This is the objective and how business planning can help park managers. Currently throughout the many park systems we are seeing new and innovative ways that park managers are doing exactly this.