

## **Affinity Group Collation Visioning Exercise Rus Peotter, WGBY**

### **WGBY**

As I begin this exercise two things come immediately to mind. First, I am doing this just a few weeks shy of my fifth anniversary here at this station. Having previously spent over twenty-five years at a state network, I have seen a lot of changes here at WGBY in western Massachusetts since the summer of 2001. Second, although it is a cliché that the world is changing quickly it does seem that in the past year the pace of that change has approached the threshold where I have difficulty appreciating how fast we are moving forward. For instance, since the introduction of the video iPod in October, changes in the television industry that had already been moving quickly now seem to be heading at Doppler speed.

Those two points taken together make it difficult for me to give much credibility to any vision for five or six years into the future, but I'm happy to give it a try.

### **Perspective #1 – From the Viewers Living Room**

It is always nice to visit the home of a viewer/ member; especially this visit where I am undetected. The residents go about their routine and have their discussion without any awareness of my presence. This home is a great place, one I might have designed for myself. It has very open architecture so I'm not really sitting in the "living room", but rather in the midst of several joined living spaces. However, many screens can be seen throughout. The kids, off in the corner used as a den, study at separate desks looking over the notes from their day's classes that their teachers just posted on the school's web site. The eighth-grader gets up and goes into the kitchen to ask his father a question. The father is also looking at a small screen mounted underneath the cabinets trying to create a complex noodle creation for a party that is coming up in a couple of days. I notice that the web sight is branded WGBY with two panes on the screen: one with the recipe the other with streaming video showing step by step of how to actually create the dish. He hits "pause" as his son asks a question about Shay's Rebellion. The fathers says, "you know, I saw a documentary on WGBY on Shay's Rebellion a couple of years ago, why don't you check their web site and watch a little of it and maybe there is some other information you could access." The eighth grader returns to his workstation and finds not only the archive documentary but links to Springfield Armory and numerous other Shay's Rebellion sites give him all the material he needs to get a better grasp of his assignment and complete his homework.

I glance to the other side of the room where mom barely has her eyes open in spite of the high definition images from the stage of Lincoln Center. It has clearly been a long day for her. Fortunately, I notice the small VOD screen bug and know that in spite of the fact that she is missing the broadcast of this live opera, she will have the opportunity to watch it all later that evening after she grabs some sleep or even on the weekend when she has time.

Although this "vision" of this future is not too difficult to imagine technologically, or even programmatically, the broad range of material that this station makes available from public broadcasters, cultural institutions both nationally and locally applies to a large part of this family's life. What *has* changed since 2006 is how much better WGBY is able to package all

this so that it can be more easily accessed and used when the family needs it. This has not only increased usage, but has also increased the overall presence of WGBY in their consciousness. Not coincidentally, WGBY is of more value to them than it has ever been. The way public radio was a companion to so many commuters in 1990s and early 2000s. Now WGBY with its programming, information and services can accompany them as well.

## **Perspective #2 – From the Board Room of a Local Foundation**

The new general manager of WGBY is just beginning her presentation to the Board of the Community Foundation of Western Massachusetts. She begins in a somewhat odd way; she describes public television during a time of great difficulty, the early twenty-first century. While public television had always been under financial stress, during this period many feared for the very future of public television. She asked the people on the board of the foundation to recall what they thought of WGBY in the 2000 and then what they think of WGBY today. She asked several people in the room about the year 2000.

They say things like “Mystery...Masterpiece Theatre”. . One grandfather mentions children’s programming like Sesame Street and Arthur.

Then the GM asks, “What do you think about WGBY today?”

One person says “Well, you’re involved with the Springfield Public Schools.”

Another, “with economic development activities throughout the region.”

Another, “with Arts and Culture in the Fine Arts Center of the Five Colleges..”

And then one younger woman somewhat sheepishly, “your outstanding coverage of the UMass hockey!”.:

The general manager paused and thanked them and then went on, “ I am here today to ask your support of a major project that will take several years to implement but builds on what you just described to me in the last few minutes.” Members of this Board of the Community Foundation and your Executive Director have told me and our staff repeatedly that we are a resource to the region in ways that are not always explicit. She turns to the Executive Director at the Foundation and asks him, “Kent, what did you call me for just two weeks ago?”

He replied “Well, “we were looking to find someone in the arts community that had a full understanding of the links between early childhood education and the performing arts. We knew that WGBY had been involved in this front for years and knew you would be a great resource.”

The GM then turns to the chair of the Distribution Committee and says, “Angela, you called our Director of Content last week.”

“Yes, “I was trying to put together a film festival with the region’s retirement communities featuring independent films and knew that your station had history of not only simply broadcasting them but producing them. You also know the filmmakers community well and I wanted you to come and give us a talk about what are the things we might consider and how we put such a project together.”

Then the GM turned to the Board’s treasurer and said, “John what was your last dealing with WGBY?”

“Well, I called to get the list of the folks you profiled on *Making It Here* so we could discuss this year’s Entrepreneurship Awards. I wanted to bring your producer and our selection committee together before next year’s regional Entrepreneurship Hall of Fame banquet.”

The GM thanked John and then said, “Many of you in this room use WGBY in a variety of ways and none of the folks who just spoke even mentioned *watching* a single program. You knew of WGBY’s deep relationships within in the community but perhaps even more powerful is the breadth of those relationships among a wide variety of organizations, institutions and creative thinkers. Today, I am asking for your support to help WGBY develop a comprehensive content and rights management system to tie together all the informational, cultural and educational assets within our region. Whereas five years ago WGBY was one of a handful of content creators, now content and stories about our region are everywhere. Today, it is access and indexing that is important if people are to use it constructively. WGBY seeks to use its deep roots into the community, technical reach and story telling ability to tie this together. This grant will provide technological, legal and professional resources we need to make this a reality.

### **Perspective #3 – From Inside This Station**

It was a dreary rainy day when I entered the studio; not unlike the first time over five years ago. When I opened the door I was surprised to see the amount of activity that was taking place inside. Over the past two few years the increasing amount of this station’s work has been happening at locations far away from our downtown Springfield studio. With major giving now providing almost a quarter of our annual revenue, much of our development staff is outside of the building each day visiting people from Connecticut up to Franklin County and west to the Berkshires. Our Berkshire office is staffed with a content producer, support person and a member of the marketing and development department. I rarely see them at the studio but today they were at the main building. It seemed like everybody was here today. I suppose I should not be surprised, but my work has taken me out of the office increasingly as well so that is probably why I had forgotten that today was the fifth anniversary of the inauguration of our regional *Mayors’ Forum*. We started this program as we recognized that although the cities of the region were very different in many ways they shared similar problems. And we also saw that the leadership and power coming from the grassroots level largely found its way to the mayor’s office. Using our editorial resources, WGBY brought the mayors together to collaborate. They assembled and prioritized issues of importance to them; help us produce documentary segments, live interviews and finally a call-in component to each of these quarterly programs. Both the mayors and WGBY have been incredibly proud of this show not only because it has helped explore a variety of issues, but also help build a sense of regional identity in a place, which for a very long time, had grown quite provincial.

After shaking a few hands, I went up to my office and turned on the computer. As I sat down, I realized that the Mayor show is a terrific illustration of one of the major focuses of this station in the past few years. While technology has allowed public broadcasting to form “communities of interest” all across the world, people still ultimately need to have a sense of place. In 2002, we began sending our staff out of the station to hear and then tell the stories of the people that live in our region. This became a valuable addition to the stories that PBS and public television produces nationally. And since 2005, it has been more than the producers that have gone out - it has been the development staff, the outreach staff and the education staff. All of them realize that as a PBS station we can use our national relationships to access the national and international expertise and information to solve local problems. But to understand those local problems we

need to be out in the community listening, suggesting and collaborating. Because of the personal networks we have created, major giving is way up, annual giving at the membership level continues to be strong in spite of declining national trends. Relationships that our staff have developed with professionals from many other institutions, have created a stream of grant funding on collaborative projects. These have been successful far in excess of any expectations in 2006. Additional revenues of pledge and sponsorship now comprise less than 30% of the overall station budget. Of course we have had struggles with values alignment, internal communications and organizational structure. Especially considering that our small staff is outside of the building so much and drawn in so many directions. But we have developed those mechanisms and think the future of public media is very bright.