

Local Service Initiatives

Name of Initiative: The WGBH Forum Network

Station: WGBH Boston

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Briefly describe the initiative and be as specific as you can be about the products or services that the initiative includes.

The WGBH Forum Network is an online archive of video streaming webcasts and audio podcasts of free public lectures and events from the Greater Boston area. Working with a group of 27 lecture providers including libraries, museums, universities and community groups, we have created a 1,200 lecture archive, which serves, at no cost to the user, 10,000 video streaming sessions per month, as well as a weekly audio podcast which is downloaded 15,000 times per month.

How does this initiative fit into your “portfolio” of other Local Service Initiatives? Is it one of many initiatives and projects, or does it take the bulk of your “Local” resources?

We curate the featured lectures on the Forum homepage and have created sections of the Forum website which align with our local TV, Radio and Digital Cable offerings. We also feature links to related lectures in e mails to our various membership groups.

Whenever we have an outreach effort, we use Forum lectures in support of it.

What station assets, competencies and/or relationships does the initiative build upon?

The Forum leverages our deep experience in websites and streaming media, and more recently in podcasting. The project extends and deepens existing relationships with major cultural and educational institutions in our community (e.g. the Boston Public Library, Museum of Science, Museum of Afro American History, etc.) who provide free lectures and panels for the public.

How would you describe the community benefit of this work? What needs are being addressed?

By creating this archive, and promoting it through Radio, TV and Web, we are able to dramatically increase the impact of these lectures---over the months a web audience as large as 20 times the original live audience will see these. The lectures address issues as universal as religion or as niched as local referenda.

Who is the “customer?”

The user can be anyone with a lifelong love of learning, and/or a relationship with one of our community partners. We hear feedback from a wide array of users, who are thrilled that they didn't ‘miss’ these lectures. One interesting fact: the most heavily used category of lectures is “African American” which suggests a way of reaching under-served audience.

How do you know or measure if the customer's needs are being met?

By tracking the usage over time, we can see a classic 'long tail' pattern. We know from this that a large multiple of the original people attending the lecture are served by the Forum.

Who benefits from the initiative?

Partnering institutions use the Forum links on their own sites, with links in their e mails and other materials to promote their own lecture series. The Forum drives traffic to their own sites as well. Partners clearly feel they benefit by participating, and WGBH's viewers and listeners benefit from this unique service.

How do you measure the benefits?

We keep statistics on usage of these lectures, and of the podcast downloads and chart their usage, making regular reports to the partners. We have begun to track the ratio of Attendees-to-streams served for lectures, which provides a powerful tool to measure impact. Also our partners find the Forum is very valuable in promoting their lecture series.

Describe the financial model for the initiative, being as specific as possible. How much does it cost? What are the sources and amount of revenue? How does it fit into your station's overall economic model?

We charge modest fees to participating partners and this generates about approximately 25% of the total. Roughly another 50% comes from the Lowell Institute, a local family Foundation which also contributes to the funding of many of the lecture series themselves. The remainder is in-kind from WGBH, largely in the form of technical support. We also received a \$45,000 grant from CPB to pilot the concept in other communities (see below) We are looking to expand the revenue sources to include sponsorship from national foundations, possibly in the subject categories of the lectures (Science, Humanities, etc.).

Could other stations use this idea or model? Would it work for any size station or licensee type?

Yes. In fact we are concluding a one year pilot with three other public broadcasters, who are presenting, with our help, their own local versions of the Forum. They are: Oregon Public Broadcasting, WABE in Atlanta and WCPN in Cleveland. We have surfaced and solved a number of issues, gained a rich knowledge dividend, and are looking forward to a broader pilot of this concept.

***Please send this information to Brian Edstrom: bedstrom@tpt.org**