

## Our Place: Community Ambassadors Podcast

Transcript of audio taken from the interactive podcast recorded on 14 April 2008

**Matt:** So thanks everybody for joining us on our first Our Place Podcast. Today we're going to be looking at Community Ambassadors, what are they and why are they important? I'm going to start off by introducing Becca Vallins who is currently the facilitator for the Our Place Network, first of all what are Community Ambassadors?

**Becca:** A Community Ambassador is somebody who is hopefully part of the community you want to engage or at least very closely tied to the community you want to engage, but somebody who has a lot of enthusiasm for your organisation and the kind of events that you're presenting and is interested in a closer involvement and who you can then work with to engage that community in a deeper way.

**Matt:** So they're volunteers, are they then Becca?

**Becca:** They can be volunteers, they can be paid, they work in various ways but the idea is basically, the most important thing is that they have a passion for what you do but they are able to communicate that passion to a different community.

**Matt:** So, why exactly are they important for organisations then?

**Becca:** Well, they're important in one way because people are very interested in, certainly in our line of work, are very interested in creating more diverse audiences, but also one of the exciting things that has happened with Community Ambassadors that if you start off by thinking oh! I'm going to diversify my audience by using these Ambassadors and you end up by realising that your organisation needs to change in order to diversify your audience.

**Matt:** Thanks very much Becca. So on the panels today we've got Mel Larsen, Liz Puddick and Glen Williams and rather than me talk about them I'm going to start with Mel, Mel perhaps you could just give us a few words to introduce yourself.

**Mel:** What I do is I'd help arts and heritage organisations set up, manage and sometimes to evaluate their Ambassador programs. Basically what that is, is helping arts organisations connect with new communities or connect with them in a new way.

**Matt:** Thank you very much and onto Liz Puddick.

**Liz:** I'm on the Community Learning Program at the Imperial War Museum and the program looks to involve the local people of Lambeth and Southwark in the life the museum say more than just

to get them into come in as visitors but to reset chairs, donate to the collection and eventually employees for us.

**Matt:** Thanks very much Liz and finally Glenis Williams. I know you've travelled a bit of a way today but perhaps you could give us an intro?

**Glenis:** Hi! My name is Glenis Williams I travelled from Birmingham and I'm here today to talk about being an arts ambassador. I've worked at Wolverhampton Arts & Museum Services and now I'm working for the National Trust on an exciting project called "Whose Story."

**Matt:** We've had our first questioning in from bit of a legend I think in the UK heritage sector, Miriam Levin who was formerly head of Outreach for English heritage. I shouldn't say formally, she's actually on maternity leave. Miriam's left us a question on the telephone comments line.

**Miriam:** What incentives are there for Cultural Ambassadors to actually work on behalf of an organisation? I can see what's in it for the organisation themselves, but why would anyone become an ambassador?

**Matt:** First one I think I'm going to put to Glenis.

**Glenis:** Because I've had two and half years working as an Ambassador, one of the main reasons for me wanting to do that job was because I was actually involved in the arts anyway. I've worked with greater partnerships beforehand. I felt that the program gave me good firm solid training initiatives, gave me a chance to work creatively in problem solving and actually producing marketing material as well I mean that was quite exciting. So I could brand my own work and, you know, I think once people get to know what you're doing within an organisation and you have your own branding then this sort of audience development follows really.

**Matt:** I think I'll move to Mel for this one. What would you say is actually in it for the Ambassadors themselves I mean yes you can get some nice experience but real practical solid outcomes?

**Mel:** There are so many things that they can get. It always amazes me how much people want to give to their community even very busy people want to contribute, they want to connect with people even, often it's the Ambassadors who are the busiest and the most sociable who want to be even more sociable, but they're just really interesting people. There can also be some more unusual reasons why people do. So, there was a scheme for example run in Edinburgh by an art-marketing agency. They had 300 Ambassadors who were involved in what they called the talking trade. It would be hairdressers, concierge at hotels, taxi drivers

and what they've got to ask me was something different to ask rather than where you're going on your holiday this year. So, you know, they could actually say "have you heard about this amazing new exhibition," so they felt that enhanced their day-to-day work because as well as ferrying people who are cutting their hair one of the things that I'm offering the customer is conversation, so, you know, it can be all sorts of things.

**Matt:** And moving onto Liz I mean you are a relative newcomers to this...

**Liz:** Yeah.

**Matt:** ...but it's something that I think the Imperial Wall Museum are taking more seriously. What kinds of steps you're taking to sort of recruit some of your Community Ambassadors?

**Liz:** We're kind of quite an organic way actually. The museum has been working with an organisation called 100 Black Men of London, film is five years now and it's young persons mentoring the organisation and really it's young black men and older black men actually mentoring, but they've been showing films through their education and film program. When I arrived they had been doing that for a couple of years and it's been quite successful, but I've really encouraged them to expand what they do because I can offer them something that other vendors do offer them but I give them something a bit more, which is space. I've got a conference room and I give them the space and they can host their events in that way, so they get that venue for free which for a volunteer organisation is actually a massive incentive and what I get in return is an opportunity to infuse the membership about what I'm doing but what also they can see, they say something to me and I'll try and make it happen. I say to them, if they're not happy with something I'm doing then it's their job to keep me informed and vice versa so they've really start spreading the word about things I did.

**Matt:** What kinds of processes can you put in place for recruiting these ambassadors?

**Becca:** I think there's a number of things that come into play. Who are you recruiting and that's dependent on where you're going put your adword. Word of mouth marketing is very good. Community newsletters, doctor surgery, dentist we've started to look at the way we advertise and market CABs, job centres, local press, village halls everywhere that I think community will utilise and, you know, say I think that, it's just getting it out. They're often using the normal kind of marketing database that you would normally use within your organisation.

**Matt:** Don't forget every project needs a Facebook group now as well. So I'm moving on now to a question from Sajida Aslam who is a Project Manager for "The National Trust," West Midlands and I think she's specifically working on the, "Whose Story?" project, which I would guess, Glenis has probably found somebody always.

**Glenis:** I manage yes.

**Matt:** So I think I'm going to start off, she makes an interesting point here. Is there external funding out there for this kind of work. I'm going to pose this one to Mel first I think?

**Mel:** As far as I know there isn't specific funding. I mean outside the Heritage Centre and the Art Centre a lot of ambassador programs came out of the Arts for Everyone. Some organisations have approached sponsors successfully particularly for the students by focus schemes. So they've got IT companies or big companies have sponsored schemes, you know, and they've created branded beer mats and all that kind of thing and that's worked really well. Very, very successful schemes can be built on almost no budget at all. The major cost is the time; it's the management time. So there's never a zero cost, but if there's not actual hot cash available it's not impossible to set a scheme up.

**Matt:** Has anyone had any experience of sharing an ambassador between two or more organisations? So first of all, is anybody here having experience like that?

**Liz:** I try to think of it more as then, not just being ambassadors for the work ID, but actually for the sector as a whole. I mean we will move around in organisations, so why should we think that our ambassadors should not have that kind of view and get to know the whole sector.

**Matt:** Do these schemes work when ambassadors are asked to interact with multiple communities, wonder if we could perhaps start with Mel?

**Mel:** I think they do. I mean it really depends on the nature of the project and how sensitive it is, is there a community that's felt excluded in the past and maybe it does need a single focus, but sometimes when you're doing a program that's, you're attracting a general audience. Yes, it does work, there's been lot of examples where different kinds of organisations have worked together as a consortia and in fact that's one way of addressing the funding issue as well that people pull resources and it's worked very, very well. I can imagine there would be circumstances where it might not work so well, really for the reason I said before that if you're really targeting a particular community and there is more in-depth work to understand their experiences say a museum, why they

haven't been visiting before, it might be best to justify because it can be quite a job of work. You get a lot of feedback as I think Becca was saying earlier, when you might actually start questioning how you present things, what you're presenting, how you talk about it?

**Matt:** I'm posing something to Glenis. I mean obviously Birmingham is a pretty multi-ethnic place.

**Glenis:** Yes it is.

**Matt:** Is this something that maybe you've had experience of?

**Glenis:** It's really worked because I do think there's two sides to the story because I worked on an African-Caribbean panel, and I know that if I'd have worked on a multi, you know, like an open panel, it might have proved a little bit more difficult because of some of the needs and expectations as a group. I think in terms of organisational change and things that are happening in terms of the cross-over of work, it just needed a little bit more work and a little bit more focus and I think sometimes I don't know, I'm not, I'm not saying that we should have ten different panels looking at ten different target groups, but I, I do think sometimes certain groups actually need a little bit more work, little bit more nurturing in order to get them on board and to get this work done.

**Matt:** You mentioned earlier Glenis that certain groups require more nurturing than others. I wonder if you could expand on that perhaps with an example?

**Glenis:** If you've had no traditional experience of visiting a gallery or a museum or a place of heritage, why should you go? If you've never been to the zoo with your parents, there is no reason as an adult you would go to the zoo. I think that there are several barriers that face different groups, i.e., language, interpretation, there maybe special needs with certain groups and I think certain groups need to have a little bit more nurturing and coxing if you like in order to make our organisations a bit more accessible.

**Matt:** So we've had a third question in from Alex Murphy, now that's a name I recognise, I'm sure he was involved in the early days of the Our Place Network. Alex is a Supporter Campaigns Assistant for The National Trust and she says, "The National Trust are hosting a series of environmental fairs called, 'The Big Green Days Out' and that's taking place this summer. She says, we've been looking at how to engage our existing volunteers with the event in planning during and after; could the ambassador concept be applied to an environmental remit in terms of our volunteers who are involved going out into the community before and after the event with green messages." I'm going to take this one I think first to Liz.

- Liz:** I think definitely, and I think hopefully quite easily because some people are quite ambassadorial about environmental issues anyway. So I think, actually on the topic side of that you are not going to have any problems, and I think actually getting people to talk about the event is using those ambassadors beforehand, I mean if they're already volunteering with the organisation then they're obviously pretty enthusiastic already. So it's just really about engaging them and that comes from real consultation and that comes from really listening to what they say and actually being shown that you were taking that onboard. People won't be ambassadors for you very long if you just say yes and then they don't do anything.
- Matt:** I can see that Mel's nodding her head quite vociferously there. Mel perhaps you've got something to add.
- Mel:** Yeah, I mean I really agree of what Liz has just said and what I want to add is that Liz used the word listening, and I think one thing that ambassadors are really good at it is also listening, you know, it's not just listening to the ambassadors but ambassadors are good at listening to the communities that you want to target. They may well be able to find out what the barriers are for people engaging with environmental issues or what they think and then feed that back and then, you know, 'Big Green Days Out' can find out more about what is it that has people get engaged or not get engaged and that's really useful information.
- Matt:** I just seen Glenis raise her hand, Glenis perhaps you'd like to add.
- Glenis:** No, I just like to say, I think it's quite interesting. You've got this community engagement before and afterwards, and I know that the African Caribbean panel were very much involved in the evaluation process of events and steering us in the right direction as to where we were going wrong and some of the ideas that they came up with were absolutely fantastic because they're not so integrally within the organisation, they're thinking outside the box so it's very fresh and very creative so evaluation is one.
- Matt:** I know when were talking earlier about how we were going to format this podcast, there was something, Becca I think wanted to make a point.
- Becca:** Yeah. No well, it was interesting, we've been doing the events, we've got the fairs, we've got the changing programs at museums and I wondered how you could engage an ambassador when what you have is something quite static. So for example, a landscape or a ruined castle where you don't necessarily have a changing program of events, it is just the place itself that you want to attract people to, and how do you excite people to get them involved in that?

**Glenis:** The 'Whose Story' project is about looking at hidden histories within the property. We have four properties that are involved in the program, two rural and two urban, and the research that's been done is highlighted 'Hidden Histories.' We've found letters from Haile Selassie, we've discovered two beautiful Indian princesses at Whitwick Manor, and I think that there are these hidden underlined stories within properties that aren't necessarily highlighted in a property, and I think sometimes just seeing a gem reflected in a property that reflects your history can actually help with audience development. When we look at interpretation, using a more theatrical approach or using...

**Matt:** Ghost stories mostly.

**Glenis:** ...yeah just bringing the place to life really, you know, role play, actors can speak a thousand words, so just being in that place, knowing the history of that place and what happened in that place.

**Liz:** I think because well, it's really important that you share with the ambassador the constraints of which you're working, so they get a real understanding of, I mean a museum's not a static site, but it's not exactly a fast moving beast either, and so the pace of change maybe incredibly slow, but by learning about how organisations work, again you're equipping that ambassador with more than just taking their knowledge again, you're sharing something with them so they can explain that to community and share it back to you.

**Matt:** I'd just like to make the final question I think towards Mel. Mel you're a relative veteran in this field, as I understand it. I'd like to ask you, how can a scheme be sustained when a community ambassador no longer works for the organisation?

**Mel:** Some of the things that work are, first of all have a mechanism for retaining the context that that person's built up. You create a database, which might be the audience says or visitors, or there's a handover to someone. So all of those relationships have got built up don't get lost. Secondly, be really clear in your organisation about what your plan for the visitor is, you know, what's next for them, are they going to visit again, or will they become a member, or is it that you want them to visit the website, or you want them to pass on the invitation to someone else so that if you know what's next then you can invite them to do that, and you don't necessarily have to have the ambassadors to do that because they've already made the initial connection.

**Matt:** I think I'd like to draw this to a conclusion now. First of all thank you everybody who is in the studio for taking part, it's been very, very good. Also, thanks to the community for actually putting their questions forward because we'd like to say as a conversation rather than just us creating a five-way monologue I guess. You

can actually put any further questions to the panel, and I think we're going to keep that forum live for up to three days, so you can just leave questions there, and we'll put it back out as a separate resource through the resource section. I've had a really good time listening to all, and thank you very much and good-bye.

**Liz:** Thank you.

**Mel:** Thank you.

**Glenis:** Thank you.