

BY Judy Anderson

In Bitter Root Land Trust's spring 2018 newsletter, Executive Director Gavin Ricklefs shared his family tradition of taking each of his children on a fishing trip when they're old enough to camp overnight and cast a fly. The story struck a chord and several people remembered it months later: "Wait a minute. I know you. You're the one that takes his daughter fishing, right? I read about you in the newsletter."



PHOTO OF GATE BY GAVIN RICKLEFS

"Communications is the ask"

"Tell me what the problem is, what you're doing about it, why you think those actions might make a difference and how you'll know if they do. Then we can talk." Penelope Burk of Cygnus Applied Research is quoting a donor from a survey of over 20,000 donors to assess their expectations when it comes to communications and fundraising.

Burk and others find that talking and writing about how conservation can, and is, changing lives is central to raising awareness, building trust and ultimately increasing donor engagement.

When you change your content to become inspirational—addressing community problems and

challenges while showing conservation as a tool for authentic and tangible change—people notice. When you use shared human values—like caring for others, empathy, compassion, love of family, service for country or others, self-reliance, health, enhancing the lives of youth or elders or concern for those less fortunate—as a basis for your content and the work of conservation, more people connect with your land trust and can envision a place for themselves within your work.

There's a Shift Happening

Writing and using visual storytelling to persuade and inspire is the basis of strong engagement. "Communications is no longer an appendage to the work, but an integral part," reflects Andrew Sherry of the Knight Foundation. "In other words, it *is* the work."

Burk takes that thought further, explaining, “Communications *is* the ask; communication powers the philanthropic spire and readies donors for the next ask.” Her research has found that 46% of donors decide to stop giving “for reasons that are tied to a lack of meaningful information or to a feeling that their giving is not appreciated.”

There needs to be a strategy that ensures an ongoing relevant and engaging connection. Daniel Levitin, a neuroscientist, musician and author, shares in *The Organized Mind: Thinking Straight in the Age of Information Overload*, “We can have trouble separating the trivial from the important, and all this information processing makes us tired.”

Levitin is onto something here, given the barrage of information that shows no sign of slowing down.

We need to ensure that people don’t simply tune out or burn out from the information overload based on material they find dull, labor intensive or irrelevant. This is, in part, as Burk documents, why people skim-read like never before. As her surveys note, “Donors are drowning in a sea of information and making decisions very quickly.”

Shane Parrish, a blogger focusing on change, decision-making and organizational strategy observes an increasingly critical point: “What counts is the number of connections between ideas, not the number of ideas.” Consider the impact of that statement with the reality that the average person now receives five times more information than they did in 1986 due to smartphones and 24-hour news.

Land Trusts That Adapt See Results

Land trusts that shift toward an approach that connects the dots between ideas, empowering their donors and community members to see themselves as *the changemakers*, and reframing their work based upon their values with a strong culture of appreciation, see increased levels of volunteering, donations, retention of current donors, return of lapsed donors, partnerships and often a marked increase in land protection.

Ann Cole, executive director of the accredited Mendocino Land Trust in Ft. Bragg, California, relayed that after the organization overhauled its communication style and content, a major donor emailed her to say, “It feels like you are really talking to me, instead of just about your organization, and I and others I know are feeling more interested in engaging with what you’re doing.”

Mendocino’s fundraising more than doubled in the first two years it took this integrated approach. As a small land trust without a development department, its fundraising has continued to grow incrementally using the strategy.

The accredited Driftless Area Land Conservancy in Dodgeville, Wisconsin, has also seen fundraising steadily increase, allowing it to hire additional staff and increase community engagement and land protection work. The staff began this transition in 2012 and have seen membership grow by 180%, and funding from individual donors has increased 320% since 2011.

Kaniksu Land Trust, an accredited land trust in Sandpoint, Idaho, also witnessed an increase in donor activity in part because of its communication shift, but equally important, its new community conservation lands that new donors became excited about. Staff started this process in 2015 and have been able to increase staff, land protection and programming as a result. Eric Grace, former executive director, noted before he left that “We have seen our donor base increase by 30% and are on track to complete more conservation projects than before. The \$1 million plus capital campaign will help fund KLT to do the types of programming on our land that address issues of humanity as well as conservation. We had a 28% increase in the total number of projects KLT closed in one year.”

The accredited Bitter Root Land Trust in Montana, with a staff of 6.25 full-time people, is now in the process of establishing a welcoming and inclusive

communications and fundraising strategy as it launches several significant land protection initiatives. The result? Donations are up and donors and community members are sharing feedback, such as this: “I got home from work today to find your newsletter waiting for me. Right away I wanted to open it because of the beautiful cover; drew me right in and brought tears to the eyes. Actually there isn’t a page in this newsletter that isn’t appealing, interesting and compelling. I think this is the nicest newsletter I’ve seen in a long time.”

If You Are Welcoming and Inspiring, People Will Care

Those examples aren’t outliers. Adopting this approach generally results in land trusts increasing their donations by 33% to 72% over a three- to five-year period depending on how consistent they are in providing thoughtful, integrated (with a regular rhythm of communication and engagement), inspirational and welcoming communications with readers and community members.

Gail Perry, fundraising consultant and blogger emphasizes that “You as a fundraiser need to get much better at how you communicate—because it’s these happy touches that will prime the donor to be ready to give again. Fundraisers these days can NOT rely on just a strong appeal letter! Instead you have to give your donor an entire experience via your communications.”

Modeling an engagement strategy where people from all walks of life, at all giving levels, matter—as people, not as ATM machines—will give you results. In a world that can feel like it’s spinning out of control, you’ll be providing the inspiration and hope people need to create a better future for those they love...for generations to come. 🌱

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