

10 things to do differently

1. Open at weekends – do you know what opening times best suit your customers?

In the world of 'infrastructure support' which embraces providers that help frontline organisations do their jobs in the community, working hours are predominantly weekdays 9 – 5 with a little evening work (usually meetings). Funding cuts means that frontline organisations are increasingly being run by volunteers – many of whom have paid employment.

If we're serious about being 'customer focused' then maybe we should be considering being available when people are around to use our services – at weekends? This is not about being open 7 days a week; it might be that the office is closed on Mondays, Wednesday and Fridays. Those who have tried weekend opening say that demand didn't justify continuation of the experiment, but I wonder whether they gave up too soon and really pushed it; it will need a sustained push to let people know and changing habits takes time.

2. Ignore administrative boundaries – what would happen if you drew a 10 mile radius around your building and you served that area?

Why do you work in the (geographical) areas you do? Usually it's because that's what the funders pay for. In some cases this is quite illogical in terms of reaching your customers – particularly when you're located on the edge of a large administrative district. Even when your area of operation is based on need, people rarely fit into neat little boxes.

If you were an independent business, you'd draw a circle around your base and that would be your area of operation – where you can reach customers most cost-effectively face-to-face (assuming there aren't serious physical barriers stopping you, such as a river valley that floods regularly).

If organisations are increasing earning unrestricted income and having relatively less reliance on geographically targeted grant funding, why not try tearing up the map and crossing boundaries? If your neighbours accuse you of treading on their toes – come to a happy reciprocal arrangement or simply offer consumers both services and let them choose!

3. Wear your heart on your sleeve – are your values clear to everyone?

Authenticity is an increasingly valuable commodity – witness the backlash against political spin and corruption in parliament, the interest in the provenance of the food we eat, and the number of businesses passing themselves off as social enterprises. Most voluntary sector organisations express their values – alongside their vision and mission - but these are often buried in a 3 -5 year strategic plan which rarely sees the light of day.

Some years ago, Community Links in East London researched and campaigned on the 'value of values' – for differentiating our organisations from others, particularly in competitive tendering

situations. They advocated that organisations display their values (assuming these have been identified!) wherever they will be seen – on the front page of websites, on the bottom of e-mails, and in other high-profile places. Of course, once you publicise your values you have to live them 365 days a year!

4. Spend 80% of your time on 20% of your contacts – can you name your most important contacts?

The Pareto Principle (also described as the ‘80:20 rule’) suggests that, across a wide range of types and sizes of organisations 80% of the business comes from 20% of customers. Applying this to a voluntary sector organisations (or social enterprises) – the most cost-effective use of limited resources (time and money) might be to effectively ignore 80% of the contacts on your database and invest in the rest.

But can you identify your ‘20%’ – not necessarily your biggest or most affluent members/contacts, but the ones who most deserve to have your attention? These people are your VIPs who would reward your understanding of/ focus on their needs with increased support for your organisation, advocacy of your behalf to their peers, and a more satisfying and productive relationship on both sides. Try it for 6 months and see what happens.

5. Simply innovate – when did you last actively simplify a support service?

We often assume that innovation and service improvements are about adding to what’s already on offer. This isn’t necessarily the case...

There’s a tendency to think of innovation as coming up with the latest gadget or adding new features onto existing ones. But the concept of breakthrough simplicity recognizes that today, the most powerful innovations don’t manifest themselves as new bells and whistles. They take the form of better customer experiences (or patient experiences, or citizen experiences). And one of the best ways to improve any experience is to simplify it - to remove complications, unnecessary layers, hassles, or distractions, while focusing on the essence of what people want and need in that particular situation. Source: www.fastcodesign.com/1672583/how-to-improve-any-service-by-simplifying-it

6. Start with a ‘white room’ – if you could re-design your reception area, what would it look like?

Organisations evolved and, understandably, they are shaped by the people who have worked in them and by past opportunities and restrictions. But this means that most people would not organise their place of work as it is now if they could start all over again. Staff are only too familiar with what doesn’t work, but they’re too busy with the day-to-day to do anything radically different.

But imagine you could wave a wand and completely re-work your reception area (arguably the most important part of the building) If it was literally, as well as metaphorically, an empty white room – no decoration, no furniture, no carpet even – what would you do to create the right impression for people discovering your organisation for the first time? And what if you called it an ‘information point’ rather than ‘reception’?

7. Put people in the picture – how do you feature real people in your materials?

For a sector which revolves around providing products and services to ‘real people’, often face-to-face, we’re surprising bad at featuring them in our materials. And in this area we are missing a trick because people connect with people, not organisations.

Yes – the household name charities hire photographers and writers to tell stories, but smaller organisations often fall way behind. A common response is to say ‘we can’t afford professional photographers and writers’ or ‘we have to protect the anonymity of our service-users’. But this is just a cop-out.

You don’t need to be an expert to take a good photograph or to conduct an effective interview with someone – you can learn! And there are lots of ways of protecting identities where necessary (and the reluctance of individuals to be photographed, with permission, is often a misconception).

8. Stop wasting time in meetings – what if the average number and length of your meetings was instantly halved?

People support our organisations for what we’re doing, not what we’re talking about doing! We’re probably no better or worse than other sectors in spending hours and hours in seemingly pointless meetings, but when we’re spending public money it comes with additional responsibilities.

So why not cut down on unproductive meeting time (and often travel) by using arms length communication tools effectively. And here’s a tip from a low-cost airline - have all your meetings standing up. It helps focus discussions!

9. Agree the right size for your organisation – do you know this already?

Many voluntary sector organisations have never sat down and thought about the ‘right’ size for their operation or even how they would start to define ‘the right size’. Is it about quantity or quality, and how does that relate to impact? Clearly we don’t have control over the all the factors that enable growth – resources (people, skills, money) and demand (people with a need and able to pay for, your goods and services) but what if you could wave a wand – would you want to be bigger and, if so, by how much?

Seth Godin, a US thinker and writer on business practices, invites companies to speculate about 'adding a zero' to aspects of their operations. He writes *"What happens if, instead of one sales call a day, you make ten? Or if instead of 3 freelancers working on scaling your work, you have thirty? What happens if you add a zero in places where it feels impossible to handle... what then? Scale isn't always the answer, but if it is, then scale. Build the systems necessary to dramatically change your impact. Halfway gets you nowhere."*

10. Innovate Your Process – when did you last review your service systems?

This is advice from Paul Sloane, a UK author and speaker on innovation. Despite sounding a bit theoretical, it has a nice practical ring about it. Sloane suggests you break down an existing process into steps and then try re-arranging them. Think of the main stages in having a meal in a conventional restaurant (order, cook, eat, pay) then consider the different sequence (of the same steps) when you go to a fast-food restaurant.

By re-arranging the steps (or removing some altogether) processes can be improved and, particularly if the customer is doing some of them instead of the provider, you can save time and money. Think how the creation of supermarkets in 1920s, and more recently online ordering, has revolutionised shopping. And some things go round in cycles – my mum had home delivery from the grocers 50 years ago!

*This list was compiled by Chris Lee, Hubs Manager with Transforming Local Infrastructure Hertfordshire. For a Transforming Together TopicSheet on **'Doing Things Differently'** (available August 2013) contact chris@communityactiondacorum.org.uk*