Building a Community Institution
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It was almost 40 years ago when the first station that launched Minnesota Public Radio transmitted its first broadcast. On a cold day in January, we didn’t have lofty visions. We weren’t asking, “How do we become a community institution?” We were asking, “How do we get on the air?” And if we get on, “How do we stay on?”

Yet, from the outset, we had one mission – to serve an audience (not to serve our university parent), but to serve an audience, to provide listeners the highest quality information and cultural programming, delivered with the highest production values our budget would allow. Looking back, it’s clear how important that “audience-focused” mission was. Since then, the desire to better serve our audience has driven virtually every major decision we’ve made.

There was another factor at work in the beginning. Maybe it was naïveté. Maybe it was unbridled optimism. But there was a sense that “if you build it, they will come.” And of course they did. But it’s that sense of optimism and risk-taking that has driven much of MPR’s success.

Today, we have 800,000 regional listeners in Minnesota who receive programming over our 37-station network. We have 90,000 supporting members.

In the Twin Cities, there are three analog channels of Minnesota Public Radio programming – classical music, alternative music, and news and information. In the rest of the state, we broadcast two channels – classical music and news and information – to virtually every corner of the state. About half of our stations are now digital, which triples the programming we can present.

Across the country, American Public Media produces and distributes programming heard by more than 14.5 million listeners each week. That makes it the second largest producer after NPR.

I think our listeners would tell you that Minnesota Public Radio is an important part of their lives and their communities. They certainly act that way when:

- They contribute over $12 million in “listener support” to our annual operating budget;
- They listen an average of seven to eight hours a week; and
- They come to events and seek us out online.
And surveys indicate they trust us.

**A Propitious Time**
Public radio has come of age at a propitious time. Consolidation is “genericizing” commercial radio. Public radio, meanwhile, has the opportunity to tap into the potential of new, increasingly popular technologies that allow us to connect with our audiences. We have a content niche and an increasingly important one. And we have the audience we want.

But we can’t take that audience for granted.

Our radio audience is aging – and younger people, accustomed to instant news and information on the Web, expect a different experience from us.

Technology is shaping those expectations. It is putting the audience increasingly in charge.

iPods are plugged into nearly everyone. Special ports in cars next year will make it easier to play iPod music through your car audio system. “Radios” that look, sound and operate like high-quality radios, but take their signal from wi-fi rather than from a local transmitter, work very well – and make any station or audio stream available anywhere.

Projections show a rise in the use of Web-based media to a point that may soon equal radio listening. Certainly, new technologies like podcasting and Web streaming present us with new opportunities – and challenges.

With audiences increasingly in control of when and where they listen, it is no time to take them – or our stature in the community – for granted.

The competition we need to worry about doesn’t seem to be satellite radio. I don’t think it’s commercial knock-offs of public radio, like the *Washington Post* station, either.

It’s iPods. Their use reduces radio listening time.

Public radio stations – like most traditional media – are at a critical juncture. We need to be smarter and have a clear vision now. We need to anticipate what our audiences want and where they will turn to to get it. We should be taking steps to adopt new technologies and create programming on all platforms that will keep us in the game.
That doesn’t mean we should throw out the fundamentals we’ve depended on to build our stations.

But, I think it does mean that we should avoid the trap of “institutional thinking.” Of leaning on the past to define our future. We need to think about the “role” of the public radio station. And about our roles in public radio.

Four Fundamentals
Today, I want to talk about the four elements that, I think, have been essential to MPR’s growth and evolution – and that will continue to be critical to our organization. Those fundamentals are:

• Leadership
• Vision
• Localism and
• Branding

Leadership
First, leadership. Effective leadership requires both an engaged board of directors (or board of supporters) and a talented, committed, capable management team.

To begin, I want to talk about the importance of the board of directors. The lack of a strong, focused board is the principal reason that many public radio organizations never fully achieve success or significance.

Enlisting a board of outside trustees was the first step we took in forming Minnesota Public Radio. We were careful to recruit people who were leaders in the community – individuals whom we thought would be ambitious on behalf of Minnesota Public Radio – and demanding of me and our leadership team.

Over the years, the expertise, oversight and involvement of that board have been invaluable. Board members have mentored. They’ve challenged. They’ve questioned.

Their tough, visionary leadership has been central to the success of all of our public radio ventures: MPR, American Public Radio, Greenspring Media Group and American Public Media.

Our board has demanded strong day-to-day leadership and quality senior managers inside our organizations. They’ve demanded thoughtful strategic plans. They’ve demanded ongoing succession planning for every level. They have demanded ongoing assessment of our managers and those who report to them.
They have implemented incentive compensation systems to reward success. In that process, they have made us stronger and better.

Our industry has had a number of strong leaders. But, I wonder if our expectations for those who hold the top jobs in our stations have been too modest. I wonder if we or our governing boards really search to find the most capable, experienced candidates. Do we recruit? Or do we tend to hire too often and too easily from each other? Or promote employees into top posts because they’re a known quantity…when they may not be the best qualified? We need to become much more demanding and deliberate in choosing our top leaders.

Even before a board (or the governing entity) searches for a CEO or other top executives, it needs to define the experience and qualifications needed to lift our organizations to the next level. The time has long since passed – if it ever existed – when our senior managers could focus solely on operations or could think of themselves as mere “transmitters” of programming.

They need to be “in and of” the community. They need to be involved and recognized for their role and their ability to contribute. Ideally, our senior managers should serve on boards – of both for-profit and non-profit organizations. They should be on community commissions and task forces. They should have access to corporate and political leaders and be welcomed across the community as concerned, committed contributors.

**Vision**

Vision is the second of the four fundamentals that has helped Minnesota Public Radio evolve as a trusted community institution. Our mission – “to serve listeners” – is simple enough. But, you and I both know it entails layer upon layer of complexity – from conceiving a role for our organizations that is relevant, meaningful and exciting for both internal and external stakeholders, to implementing new technologies, to recruiting and retaining talent, to selecting and scheduling programming, to raising funds. In fact, that role may be too broad and it may be time to distinguish between the “operating officer” of our stations and the CEO.

Vision is what we need in order to see the best options for us in the future.

Here are a few questions I try to answer in thinking about our future:

- What makes us, as local stations, relevant?
- What is the plan for attracting new audiences?
• What is the best technology to reach those audiences?
• Do we have the quality of people with the relevant experience we need?
• How do we identify and attract new Web and radio talent and promote creativity?
• What is our plan for audience engagement?
• How do we connect with listeners beyond broadcasting?
• How do we create the “place” that builds value and loyalty and that our listeners will trust?
• How do we grow without the kind of marketing dollars commercial media have?
• How much emphasis should there be on growth in audiences at the expense of quality programming?
• Where is the line that defines non-commercial in a world of increasingly attractive underwriting opportunities?
• How do we find the money to become the kind of organization we see as our future?

Each of these is a multi-faceted question. And the answers will result in different strategies for different kinds of stations.

Developing the vision is only the first step. Getting others to buy into it is just as important. Effectively communicating your vision energizes employees and generates revenue from the community to implement it. Great ideas fade when those who could help them come alive never hear about them. Our experience has taught us to paint a clear picture of the vision – of what could be if the vision is realized. And then don’t be shy. Tell the story to anyone who can help.

But first assess the ability of the story teller. Is that person a respected, effective leader? Does she or he know the “players” in the community well enough to go to them to seek their support?

I think I do – now. I didn’t 20 years ago. On Monday, Minnesota Public Radio finished raising $56 million dollars for a major capital campaign. Our fund-raising consultant said we would be unable to raise a third of that amount. And he could have been right.

One difference is the importance of having a leader who has potential and one whom your board or governing leadership is comfortable introducing to their contacts in the community.

I’ve watched this happen to Bill Davis in the fragmented communities of Los Angeles. In Bill’s case, the Board embraced him as an equal. They have included him and they have enabled him to play a larger role as a result.
Board members will fail in their role as governing trustees if they don’t recognize their obligation to make it clear that the head of a public radio organization is a key community player – just like a newly elected senator or a new CEO or a university president. They will fail your organization if they don’t welcome him or her in the same way in social and business circles.

The fact is, you can’t do it without people who can connect you to people who are able to offer resources – unless, as a mentor once told me, you were “born into the cream of wheat” and already have those contacts.

Nurturing relationships with community contacts with the means to help isn’t easy. Minnesota Public Radio once received a $1 million gift from an Internet mogul – by e-mail. We had researched him, invited him to visit and have dinner. It worked. He made the gift. But then, I let the relationship wither. I did not stay in regular contact as the CEO should have. I did not tell him of our successes as we used his funds. And we lost him. He made no further gifts and has no further contact.

That was a big mistake. We’ve learned that regular contact at the CEO level is required. It takes thought about the relevant messages that need to be regularly sent. And it takes time in meeting and communicating. But it pays off.

**Localism**

What I call “localism” is the third fundamental element that has helped Minnesota Public Radio become a significant community player in our region. “Localism” is an umbrella term that includes:

- Local programming – broadcasts, live events and online content;
- Local community involvement, such as the participation of our senior managers on boards or commissions;
- Local partnerships with local organizations; and
- Local branding.

Certainly national programming is important and it contributes to our stations’ significance. But local programming is equally important. It defines what public radio is and should be. And, it’s increasingly what differentiates us.

Local programming may be our most compelling strategy.
With deregulation and consolidation, commercial station business models don’t support serious coverage of local issues, news or the arts.

So a strong local focus gives us a trump card as we compete with commercial radio – not to mention newspapers and online news. And the same is true with national podcasts and streaming national content and national satellite radio. None can offer the local content that our audiences value.

We, on the other hand, can be local on our stations, our Web sites; our audio streams; and through our podcasts of local content. And if our local stations are strong – if they are seen as true community institutions – our national system becomes even stronger.

I don’t think you can become a significant community institution solely by transmitting national programming. You can make someone else (like NPR or American Public Media) significant. But you will become increasingly irrelevant if you don’t add local or community value. (That might be a surprising message from someone at American Public Media, which focuses on national programming.)

National programming attracts audiences. Local programming creates loyalty, relevance and community visibility – the beginnings of building a “community institution.”

To fully take advantage of “local” positioning, stations need to produce local programming that makes an impact, that provides listeners information and insights they may not find elsewhere – that serves their need for a “sense of place.”

I’ve always wondered about that phrase, “a sense of place.” We’ve used it as a program title and it pops up periodically. Increasingly I think I understand. It’s about where I “fit.”

As I flew into Amsterdam last month, I looked down on people doing things I do, on land that looked familiar but felt ‘foreign,’ partly because I had no “fit” there. No context. No roots.

I was hiking in the mountains a few weeks ago and using a hand-held GPS to keep from getting completely lost. It could show me a square mile, a state or the country. But I wasn’t interested in where London was. I didn’t care where Denver was. I wanted a map for the 10 square miles around me in the Rocky Mountains. That’s all that mattered because, at that moment, that was what was affecting my life the most. And I think that’s how it is with local radio and a sense of place.
Every day at Minnesota Public Radio, we face a question that haunts us about our programming: “What if we’re not good enough?” What if the programming we are producing, or that NPR is producing, or that American Public Media is producing, isn’t as good as it needs to be? How can we afford to make it better?

We continually challenge ourselves to create programming that is relevant, that is accurate, that is deep in its ability to explain an issue. Programming that contributes in a positive way to public debate, to public discourse and to the quality of social, economic, cultural and political life in Minnesota.

In MPR’s news and information programming, we try to enlighten, not to create controversy. That’s what our audience values. We continuously invest in our news organization. But even the best-funded local station is not going to be able to afford the level of quality our audiences demand and deserve. That’s why the question – “Are we good enough?” – haunts us. We probably aren’t good enough. But we are finding ways to be better.

One way we are trying to be better is by engaging the public in our programming, both by tapping their expertise in helping us better understand the news through what we call Public Insight Journalism; and by inviting them into our studios for discussion with us.

Today, we have more than 20,000 members of the public in our Public Insight Network. Those 20,000 people supplement our news professionals and make it possible to increase productivity and quality within a realistic budget. That strengthens local content in a major way – and it’s affordable. On a side note, we recently launched the Center for Innovation in Journalism to continue to develop and share the Public Insight Journalism model.

A second way we are engaging the public is through face-to-face discussion. One of the most exciting features of our new broadcast center in downtown St. Paul is a space we call “The UBS Forum.” (Obviously because UBS provided the naming grant.) The UBS Forum accommodates groups of about 150 people. We invite people on all sides of issues to come together to debate and enlighten us, including members of our news team – and we extend their knowledge through our news reporting and sometimes directly to broadcast and Web audiences.

Public involvement is adding racial, social and intellectual diversity to our content in a way that no diversity objectives for board or management can. It is adding a deeper dimension to our programming
that would not be affordable any other way – one we believe will keep us relevant and more firmly connected with our audiences.

**Brand: Who do “they” think we are?**
The fourth key element that has helped MPR solidify its place in the community is an effort to develop a strong brand.

Like it or not, a station’s impact on its community flows not only from the service it provides but also from the public’s perception of that service. Good branding helps to create and reinforce positive perceptions – and perceptions influence everything from membership to underwriting to fundraising.

A strong brand identity can strengthen your relationship with listeners. In our experience, a strong brand has been key. NPR’s programming is critical, as is American Public Media’s. But NPR – and American Public Media – are services that you and I provide to audiences through our stations. They don’t own or fund our stations and they are not our community institutions.

In Minnesota, “Minnesota Public Radio” is the brand – and NPR and American Public Media are given credit as services provided by Minnesota Public Radio. In Minnesota, Minnesota Public Radio brings you “Morning Edition” or “Marketplace.”

Our local hosts play the role of connecting the audience with things they think will interest the audience. Doing that puts the local brand in the pre-eminent spot.

The local institution becomes the trusted source guiding the audience to radio, Web and personal engagement. And when you seek major funding, that’s what listeners and donors remember.

**The Future: Think Strategically**
“Leadership,” “Vision,” “Localism” and “Branding” comprise the foundation for building stations into “community institutions.”

But here’s the irony. The more ensconced we become as “institutions,” the more we need to act – and think – like entrepreneurs. The competition won’t allow us time to puff up our chests and bask in past accomplishments – or in the accomplishments of others. Basking in the glow of “the Car Talk guys” will run its course one of these days.

With change swirling around us, we can’t count on the same approaches to keep us relevant. Clinging to the status quo is like hanging from a rotting limb – and praying it doesn’t break. True, the
limb may not snap today or tomorrow. But there is no future in it. Growing something new and strong is a must if we are to beat the typical 30-year average life of a business. (Think typewriters, for example.) We need to constantly reinvent ourselves.

Rather than wait for circumstances to shape our future, we should seriously strategize about ways to take advantage of changing circumstances. NPR has led some of those discussions with New Realities. SRG has led many major discussions on station issues and is a key station strategic resource. And each of us should be participating in our own “visioneering.”

I’ve already mentioned several areas in which public radio has growth potential. But there are many factors that should be considered as we plan for the future:

- First, no one else aggregates the quality demographics we have – a point of keen interest to underwriters and sponsors.

- New audiences and demographics are possible now with the invention of HD multi-channel radio (under the great leadership of Mike Starling.) Many think commercial radio will go after our most successful formats. At MPR we think about what we want to do for our audiences and, if Clear Channel is already doing it, we think about whether we can do it better. Content will have to come first before HD receivers make strides. And public radio should take the lead.

- Classical music and arts programming on commercial radio are disappearing, but we continue to provide these services and we see a renaissance with our classical music programming. Satellite radio has classical music. But we have classical music with hosts that live where the audience lives – and you can hear it.

- While variety in music seems to be gone from radio, public radio is in a position to offer it. Audience reception to our new Minnesota Public Radio station, The Current (which features an alternative format with substantial variety) has been excellent. And like classical music, The Current focuses on where we live: The local bands, the sense of place, the culture of our youth.

- New concepts like Gather.com, a company we have co-developed and invested in, are providing new opportunities for our audiences to interact and to deepen their experience with the programming we offer on radio. But they want to go beyond discussions of our programming. Our audiences want to engage
with each other. Audience engagement is something we are all just beginning to understand. (I actually heard a commercial broadcaster use the word the other day. But we’re there first; and we understand it best.) We need to maximize it.

At MPR, we believe that if we are going to remain relevant in a “My Space” era (where MySpace had more traffic than Google’s home page last week), we need to bring our audiences together and enable them to connect with each other in all the multifaceted ways that their myriad interests lead them, rather than just facilitating their connection with whatever our programmers create.

Look at this slide, showing the rise of user-driven media, the kind where audiences easily engage with one another. It’s clear that consumers want to contribute their knowledge and thoughts. They want to engage each other.

Public radio needs to maximize opportunities for audience engagement. That’s the reason we created Gather.com: to help them do it.

Gather’s potential is evident if you just think of the knowledge in this room. Look around you. Think about what you know about politics, geo-political issues, cars, food, the environment. You’ve all been students gathering knowledge from public radio programming for years. And you know more about more things than most people. You have depth of knowledge and quality knowledge. My Space teens are exchanging their level of knowledge. Gather engages a mature audience with knowledge of real value. And if the reach of MySpace isn’t scaring traditional media, they’re asleep.

So innovative concepts like Gather provide new opportunities for our audiences to interact with each other and to deepen their experience with the programming we offer on radio. This is what builds loyalty.

MPR has licensed its content to Gather to encourage audience interaction and to develop user-generated content to further our role as a major “community institution.” We built Gather as a commercial company because our analysis indicated that, to do this right, there would not be enough money available in the non-profit sector to achieve the leadership position. Gather has external financing of millions of dollars and it will require more before its business plan begins to fully function.
Yet you can use it now – for free. With its newest release, you can brand it yourself (as your station) or according to the specific interests of your audience. And, by doing so, you can become a more relevant part of your audience’s life.

Streaming may be the fastest growth opportunity for us. Web listening is growing. On-demand listening is growing. iPod listening is growing. WiMax is about to become ubiquitous. Streaming content is an aspect that we have to embrace. We also have to think of it as a local opportunity, as a branded opportunity, as well as a national distribution platform. Your audience trusts you. They need to think of you as the place that will “sort” all of the rest of the new media sources for them. Either you do it or you’ll need to lead them to a platform that does.

And then there is multi-casting. The promise of multi-casting is the opportunity to double or triple our service – and increase the program options available to our listeners. Multi-casting will enable terrestrial radio to provide programming diversity that is competitive with satellite radio – with the added advantage of potential new local community services – without the required subscription cost.

All of these are reasons why public radio can continue to grow, even while the media landscape changes. We just need to take full advantage of them.

Making It Happen
Entrepreneurs typically have a vision and a passion. We need to hone ours in public radio. Then we need to start doing it. To make their vision come to life, entrepreneurs need confidence – a bold belief in themselves. I think our industry could benefit from a large dose of bold belief... an attitude that says, “What we do is extremely important. We can do even more. It deserves your support.”

We need to get past ourselves. Pogo said, “We have met the enemy and he is us.” Psychologists might have said we need to work on our self-image – maybe take assertiveness training. Whatever the buzzwords are now, the notion is similar.

No where is it more important to adopt an assertive stance than in the area of fund-raising. Let me ask you something:

Do you know the potential major donors in your city?
Do you know them personally?
β If you haven’t already asked them for support, why not?
β Have you tried talking to them? Would they see you if you called?
β How do you know?

You can bet that other local and national institutions know them and that they’re successfully knocking on their doors. And their case is often weaker than yours.

People with significant resources are the ones who have traditionally made possible the building of great institutions -- from Andrew Carnegie to Leland Stanford to Joan Kroc.

If we don’t seek out the people in our communities who have resources, we won’t connect with them. So, go to the events where you can begin a conversation with them – and invite them to lunch. We should urge members of our boards to introduce us to their business associates and social friends. If necessary, make cold calls. If you’ve developed your “brand” some of those calls will work.

We also need to hone our story – and tell it wherever and whenever we have a chance. At Minnesota Public Radio, we “use the air” to talk about our commitment to the community and to quality public radio. We try (though frequently fail) to avoid using member drives to talk about coffee mugs and tote bags. Instead, we try to focus on the true benefits of public radio – for listeners and the community. And we’re quick to defend our network as a significant institution. We simply say it is and we say it on air.

Without the confidence, the hutzpa, to tell our own communities about the importance of what we do, our stations – and the industry – will never realize full potential. The people with influence, knowledge and money won’t respond and support us. And our audience will not be as well served as they might have been.

Maybe the people who produce satellite radio get up every morning and get excited about “filling unserved white space.”

But it is service to a community, to the society where we live and to maintaining an “informed citizenry” that drives me.

It’s what inspires me to recruit the best leadership and talent I can find, to continuously look for innovative new ways to serve our audiences, to invest in local programming and local news and to continue to strengthen our brand.
It is that aspect of our vision for Minnesota Public Radio – making a difference in the lives of the people of our region – that keeps me thinking about new technologies, new talent, new ideas for programming – and the money to fund it all. It’s our mission that gets me out into the community. It drives me to knock on the doors of people who have influence and resources…and to be bold in my requests.

It makes me want to tell the story of Minnesota Public Radio – and what the future holds.

It’s our focus on the audience and our service to listeners that will help us continue to grow and prosper, no matter how the sands may shift.

If we keep that focus, we can become – and continue to be – one of the most important cultural and educational assets in our communities.

We can’t hide anymore. Our mission is too important. The opportunities too great.

If you can’t do it, step back and open the door for someone who can and wants to. It can be done.

Becoming a significant community institution is a very satisfying achievement. And it’s the best way to enhance and strengthen public radio on every level.

Thank you for being willing to listen to me talk about it.

I hope you’ll do it.

And I wish you success.

Thank you.